



Bound BY THE
BRATVA

I V Y D A V I S

Bound by the Bratva

A DARK ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE ANTONOV MAFIA

BOOK ONE

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Contents

1. [Alek](#)
2. [Katia](#)
3. [Katia](#)
4. [Katia](#)
5. [Alek](#)
6. [Katia](#)
7. [Katia](#)
8. [Katia](#)
9. [Katia](#)
10. [Alek](#)
11. [Katia](#)
12. [Alek](#)
13. [Katia](#)
14. [Katia](#)
15. [Katia](#)
16. [Alek](#)
17. [Katia](#)
18. [Katia](#)
19. [Alek](#)
20. [Katia](#)

CHAPTER 1

Alek

A red glow filters through the dark room, making everything look more seductive. That's the way I want it. The more seductive it looks, the more my customers pay. It also makes the women appear sexier and more mysterious, which is important, considering they're the moneymakers of my club. Drinks flow freely. Women walk around half-naked, delivering said drinks to said customers, who eye the women with lustful gazes. Soft music pulses through the speakers as one of the women dances on the stage, grinding herself into the pole.

This strip club—The Pink Paradise—was one of my first properties after I became head of the Bratva in New York City. My father, who ran the mafia before me, thought it would be tacky to own a strip club, but I saw the money-making potential in it. Plenty of thirsty, desperate men in New York looking to stare at half-naked women. Sometimes the women are fully naked—though only on weekdays. It helps draw in crowds during the week, earning more money.

And that's how I run things—through the lens of how I can earn the most money and still keep my business safe. I'm not a risk taker. I'm not a businessman.

I sip on my glass of whiskey as I watch one of the club's better dancers—Anya. With a curvy body that any man would be desperate to get his hands on and stunning red hair, she's a favorite for sure. Out of all the girls who work here, she gets asked for the most lap dances and earns the most money in tips during her dances. She's also the one who most often gets

asked to go to our private rooms for ... more than just a dance. It's technically illegal for them to provide sexual services, but I allow it. More money means more power. Even when I get the occasional woman crying to me about not wanting to do *that* part of the job, I tell her she can either do it or get out. I don't have time for insecurities. I need confident women who want to work here. It just means more money in my pocket.

Anya gives me a wink as she shimmies over the pole. She's wearing the smallest bra, leaving almost nothing to the imagination. Combine that with her tiny thong, and she's practically naked on stage. Soon, she'll be fully naked, but it's the tease that creates the most excitement. I look around at the crowded room full of aroused men who're practically drooling at the sight of her. Their hands fly out as they pass her tips, aching to touch her hips or trail their fingers over her thighs. I like to watch this show go down. It makes me feel even more powerful knowing I'm the one who employed Anya. In a way, that makes her mine.

A lot of the women who come here for a job owe me money, or their families owe me. I tell them they can pay off their debt by working here, but only if they're one hundred percent sure. The other option is homelessness. Or ... I kill them or their family members for not paying me back what I owe. I don't give a lot of options, but that's what happens when you get into bed with the fucking Bratva. I'm ruthless. Take it or leave. Simple as that.

Anya drops to her knees and crawls over to a man who looks like he's barely out of high school. Shit. He may even be still in high school. As long as he's paying, I'll look the other way. Anya dips her chest lower to give the boy a good look at her cleavage. Her breasts practically fall out of the bra. I can't wait till she takes it off. And she will. And she'll do it for me.

Anya is an interesting case considering she didn't come to work here to pay off any debts. She told me that she just liked to dance and that there wasn't a job more suited for her than this one. I hired her on the spot. I wish more of my employees were like here—strong, competent, brave.

Another one of my girls, Stacey, walks by, carrying another glass on her tray. “Do you need another, sir?” she asks.

“Thank you,” I murmur, grabbing the new glass. I spank her ass lightly as she walks away, and she smiles at me over her shoulder. Stacey is one of the cuter girls at my club. With light blonde hair, blue eyes, and a round face, she has an innocent look about her. She began working for me when she needed to pay off her brother’s debts. Once she finished, she decided to continue working here even though I told her she could go. She said the money was too good to leave. I appreciate that. A girl after my own heart—one who understands the power of money.

I lean back in my seat and open my legs wide. Kitty, another dancer, eyes me as she walks up to me. Her long brown hair covers her small breasts. “Would you like some company, sir?” Her eyes flit down to my lap, and she frowns a little. I’m not excited. It takes a lot to get me turned on. In fact, it takes a special kind of woman. Most of the women here could do it if I were in the mood—I’d gladly fuck any of them—but I also get bored easily. Not many women can capture my interest and retain it. The only one who has slightly managed so far is Anya, and even she can bore me at times. Kitty is beautiful, don’t get me wrong. I’m just used to looking at beautiful women all day. I need more than beauty to get my cock hard.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t want some fun right now. So I motion for Kitty to come closer. Her eyes light up, and she straddles me, her ass on my lap. All the women I employ like to have a piece of me. I’m a hot commodity—with my money, power, and good looks. It’s not vain of me to say, but I know I’m attractive. I’ve tailored my look to be so. I keep my brown hair slightly ruffled. I’ve found that they prefer that over a slicked-back look. It also helps to make me look less intimidating, which I like. It shocks people more when they realize just how cruel I can be. I was blessed with striking blue eyes and a strong jawline. But my body is all my work. I exercise for several hours a day. I need to keep myself fit and strong to deal with enemies who think they have a chance of going against me. I also like that women find my muscular

build attractive. I love a good fuck session, and being in shape helps with that.

Kitty grins her hips down, giving me a true lap dance. I don't touch her. I just watch as she puts on her best sultry look and begins to moan, thinking that's what I want. But I don't care for a fake show of pleasure. I want the real thing.

I grip her waist. "Kitty, stop pretending."

She bites her lip and nods before resuming her lap dance sans moaning.

"Much better," I say. The smile she gives me is genuine.

I let Kitty continue her work as I look over her shoulder at Anya, who's now noticed Kitty on top of my lap. Anya pouts and makes her way toward me, making a big show of finally taking her top off, which gets a lot of hollers from the men in the crowd. She tosses it toward me, and it lands on Kitty's head.

Kitty huffs and tosses the bra away. "Seriously?" she says to Anya over her shoulder. "Can't you see we're in the middle of something?"

"Yes, I can see that. I just figured Mr. Antonov would rather see me than you." Anya grips her breasts. "Don't you prefer this, Alek?"

The man sitting next to me—greasy-haired and smelly—says, "You're so lucky."

I grip Kitty's waist and push her off me. "Enough of that for now." I slip Kitty a hundred-dollar bill. "For the inconvenience. Now go find someone else." Kitty shrugs and wanders off. I turn back to Anya. "Why are you talking to me, Anya? Finish your dance. Other men want to see you, too. And never call me by my name. You will refer to me as 'sir' or 'boss'."

She pouts again but nods and continues dancing, turning to the other men and showing off her gorgeous body. Her breasts are a thing of beauty; I'll give her that. But how dare she step out of line and address me like that. She hasn't earned the right to call me by my name. And my nickname on top of that.

My full name is Aleksander Antonov, but the closest people in my life call me Alek. I prefer it. It's simpler. Doesn't make me sound like a Russian oligarch from the eighteenth century.

Anya lays down on her back and lifts her legs in the air, deliberately right in front of me. Then she pulls that ridiculous thong down, giving me a good look at her pussy and creating chaos in the crowd. Men toss dollar after dollar bill at her. Some look so crazed that I'm convinced they'll run on stage. I have security all around the club to make sure nothing like that happens. I may be ruthless when it comes to my girls, but I also protect them. You work for me? I'll protect you whether you're a stripper at my club or one of my inner circle.

And speaking of my inner circle, Mikhail Smirnoff appears. "You're in my seat," he says to the greasy-haired man next to me.

"I was here first," the man replies.

Mikhail gives the man a charming smile before clapping a hand on his shoulder and saying, "If you don't move now, I'll dig my finger into your eye and scoop it right out of its socket. Understood?"

The man looks between Mikhail and me. I don't make a move to stop either of them. Finally, the man looks back at Mikhail and notices him glaring. Shuddering, he stands up and walks away. Thank fucking god. I was getting tired of his smell.

Mikhail takes the now empty seat. "What have I missed?" He sees Anya dancing on the pole, completely naked. "Apparently, a lot."

"Did you need something, Mikhail?" I ask, not taking my eyes off Anya.

"Can't your second in command just enjoy your company and the company of all these lovely ladies?"

"Yes. But you seem jittery. You only get that way when you have news to share with me."

“As a matter of fact, I do have news. We have a chance to expand our empire even more.”

Anya winks at me as she grinds herself onto the pole. “What is it?” I ask.

“So, you are listening. I wasn’t sure.”

I finally look away from Anya and turn to Mikhail. “Better?”

“Yes. The expansion would be with Gabriel Rossi. He wants to join forces and—”

“No,” I cut him off. “I’m not about to work with the fucking Italians. I know they trade in the drug business, and I’m not interested in that. I deal in clubs and hotels, restaurants, and other legal businesses. It’s helped me bring in even more under the pretense of being an upstanding businessman. It keeps the fucking cops off my back. I’m not about to get in bed with another mafia boss notorious for his men getting busted by cops. He’s careless and reckless. I’m neither of those things. And how did you hear about this anyway?”

Mikhail rubs the back of his neck. “He approached me with this deal.”

I snort. “So, he didn’t even have the balls to face me himself. That tells you everything you need to know. Gabriel Rossi is not a man I want to go into business with.”

“But think of all the money you could bring in.”

“I bring a lot in through dealing with guns as well as all my businesses. That’s plenty for me.”

“I thought you were all about money this and money that.”

“I am. I bring in millions a year, Mikhail. I’ve helped you bring in millions a year. I’m not about to risk all that by joining forces with Rossi, who’ll only get us busted by the fucking police, and then our empire will burn to the ground. I could lose everything. I’m not going to risk that. And the only reason Rossi went to you with this proposal is that he knew I’d turn him down to his face, and his pride wouldn’t allow

himself that. So, tell him no, thank you. I'm not interested." I turn back to Anya, who's now crawling on the stage, giving me a good look at her ass. God, I want to grip that ass in my hands as I fuck her. I just might have to tonight. I'm feeling bent up and frustrated, especially by Mikhail. He's my number two; he should know better than to come to me with ridiculous proposals.

"Fine. I'll tell Rossi that. Let's just hope he doesn't try to blow up one of your properties. You know how he can get."

"I do. And that's exactly why I don't want to work with him. I have security at each of my properties. He won't get close enough to blow anything up so tell him not to even bother. Now, I'd like to enjoy the show in peace."

Anya dances off the stage and onto the floor, approaching me. Other men watch with envy.

"Would you like to go somewhere private?" she says in a sultry tone.

"Collect your money and meet me back there." I motion toward one of the back rooms before giving Mikhail a nod. "Be smarter than this."

Mikhail just watches Anya as she grabs her money and I head to the private room decorated in deep reds, blacks, and purples. A large bed dominates the space, which is soundproofed for even more privacy. I can't even hear the moans and grunts from the other private rooms in here.

I sit on the bed, my legs wide, my hands clasped together. Anya enters, still naked except for her high heels. I don't say a word as she kneels before me. I do stop her, though, when she tries undoing my pants.

"I want to fuck you," I say. "Get on the bed."

Her eyes light up, and she moves with remarkable elegance and quickness in her high heels. She lies down on her back and spreads her legs wide.

"No. On your knees. Away from me."

She smiles as she gets into the correct position. I grab a condom from the bowl next to the bed. I have no desire to contract any sexual diseases. Besides, it's a requirement that any man must use a condom when getting intimate with any of my girls. I don't want to lose them to pregnancy or cause an outbreak of disease. If any man is caught not using a condom, I have no qualms about making him disappear forever.

I undo my pants and pull out my semi-erect cock. I stare at Anya's ass for a moment, rubbing myself, getting harder. Once I'm ready, I slip on the condom, then grip her hips and enter her in one thrust. Anya moans like her life depends on it. Then I fuck her with all of my might.

Anya is a wildcat in bed. She knows how to make the best sounds to get me harder and how to move her body in conjunction with mine. She's good; I'll give her that.

But she's still just my employee. One I like to fuck, yes, but nothing more.

I fuck her roughly, not holding back. I know she can take it.

My release hits me after a few minutes of fucking. Anya moans louder. Once I'm satisfied, I pull out of her. She drops down to the bed and rolls over, eyeing me up with a seductive look most men would dream of.

"Good for you?" she purrs, roaming her hands up and down her body.

"Yes. I expect it was good for you."

She stretches. "Fuck yes. You're the best lover I have."

A sudden anger goes over me, and I lean down and grip her jaw, startling. "I'm not your lover, Anya. I'm your boss. Don't get it confused. We're not in a relationship. I just like to fuck you on occasion. I also do the same to the other women here. Don't think you're any more special than any of the others. You hear me?"

Her eyes are wide as she nods.

“Good.” As I let her go, she slumps back onto the bed. “Now, go back out there and put on another show. You have more money to make, don’t you? Oh.” I reach into my pocket and pull out a hundred-dollar bill. “For you.” I toss it at her, and it lands on her stomach.

Anya looks like she wants to cry, but she takes the money and stands up. “I’m just your whore, then?”

“You’ve never been anything other than that.” I leave her there as I walk out of the room.

The rest of the evening passes by uneventfully. Anya does another show, but she doesn’t quite give me the same attention as before though she still passes me looks. She can’t help herself. Mikhail has left, probably to inform Rossi of the news. Everything is as it should be.

I have to force out the last customer because he wants to see Stacey dance some more, but I push him out the door, where he lands on his ass. Not my problem. I shut the door behind me and turn to face my girls, who are all lined up, fully clothed.

“Count your tips and inform Roger of how much you earned tonight.” Roger handles the club’s financials. “You ladies are free to go.”

They all murmur to each other as they head to the bar to count their tips.

I only leave once everyone else has gone.

Sammy, the club’s bouncer, opens the front door and calls out to me. “Hey, boss. There’s someone here who says he needs to talk to you.”

I sigh. “Who is it?”

“Grigor Ivanov.”

“Let him in.”

An older man, probably in his early sixties, enters the club. He has a head full of gray hair and sunspots covering his face and hands. Someone should really be using sunscreen.

“Grigor,” I greet. “Welcome. Do you have the money you owe me?” Grigor is one of my employees. He’s worked for the Russian mafia since my father was in charge. But Grigor fell onto hard times after my father died, and I recently caught him trying to steal from me. I told him that all debts would be forgiven if he just paid me back.

Grigor approaches me, wringing his hands. “Uh, is there somewhere private we could go?”

“No. Do you have my money or not, Grigor?” I won’t let this little weasel beat around the bush.

Grigor hangs his head. “No.”

I grimace. I could shake the man. No, I’m going to kill him. There’s no other way. No one gets to steal from me and live with it.

I turn to the women still at the bar. “You should all leave now. *Now.*”

They scramble up and quickly leave the club. Anya gives me a lingering look, but I ignore her.

I look back at Grigor. “You don’t have my money?”

“I just didn’t have time to get more of it. But if you give me more time, I swear, I’ll pay every penny back.”

When I grab the back of Grigor’s neck, he yelps. “You see, Grigor, I know you have a gambling problem. My father looked the other way, but I won’t. You don’t get to steal from me and then gamble all my money away and expect me to be ok with that. If you can’t produce the money now, I’ll have no choice but to kill you.” I push him away so hard that he falls to his knees.

“Please, please. I don’t want to die.”

“Then you should have thought about that before you decided to gamble all my money away.” I pull my gun out of my back pocket. I like to have it close to me, always. It’s almost like a security blanket. I aim it at Grigor’s head. “Unless you can give me the money now, I’m going to shoot you.”

“Wait. Wait! What if I can promise you something else instead?”

I pause. “Like what? Unless it’s money, I doubt I’ll be interested. You better make this worth my while, Grigor. I haven’t eaten dinner yet. I’m getting hungry, and you’re wasting my time.”

Grigor hesitates.

“What are you offering me?”

Grigor hangs his head.

I sigh and roll my neck. “Too late, Grigor. You’re fucking dead.”

“My daughter!”

I go still. “What?”

Grigor lifts his head back up. “I can offer you my daughter in exchange for my debts. You do that here. You let women work for you to pay off debts.”

“That’s true. I do. But never daughters of mafia men. Usually, the women who work here are in debt themselves, or they’re the daughters of drug addicts and gamblers. Never mafia girls.” In my culture, I was taught to respect mafia women. My mother was one before her death. My grandmother was one as well. When you’re head of the mafia, mafia women are prized, not glorified.

But ... I guess I could make an exception this once. Grigor, in the past, has been handy when it comes to negotiations. It would be a shame to lose him.

“My daughter is a good girl, sir,” Grigor says. “She’s submissive. She’ll work for you. She would help me pay off my debts. I know she would.”

“Does she know you’re selling her into servitude?”

Grigor looks away.

“I’ll take that as a no. Poor girl.” I chuckle and lower my gun. “Let me see a photo of her. I need to know what I’m working with.”

Grigor fumbles for his phone and pulls up a picture of her. “This is Katia.”

Suffice it to say Katia is ... fucking beautiful.

She has the prettiest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. Her red hair is luscious. And the smattering of freckles across her nose makes her look innocent. I’m surrounded by beautiful women every day, but Katia ... She takes the cake.

Just looking at her, I know I want her to be mine.

Then an idea occurs.

“I’ll take her,” I say. “Your debts will be forgiven.” Grigor slumps forward in relief. “But,” he looks up, his expression as I continue, “she’s not going to be my employee. No. Since she’s mafia and beautiful, I want her to be my wife. I’ll have complete control over her, which means complete control over you, Grigor. Now, how does that sound?”

Most people would be thrilled for a powerful man like me to marry their daughter, but Grigor understands this isn’t a good thing. Grigor can never escape me now. Not when I’ll own his daughter in marriage.

“How does that sound, Grigor?” I repeat, getting a kick out of his struggle.

Grigor finally meets my gaze. “It sounds ... good, sir. You may have my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

I smile darkly. “Good.”

CHAPTER 2

Katia

“**T**hat’s it for today. Don’t forget to read chapters three through five by next week. Have a good day,” Professor Jones says as the students in the class close their books and stuff them into their bags.

Even though I love to read, sometimes I don’t love how much homework Professor Jones assigns. At twenty-one, I’m in my last year of college and feel its effects. I’m ready to be done with school and face the “real world,” which, given the culture I grew up in, means I’ll be some man’s housewife. But at least I’ll be a housewife who has a degree. That can’t be said for a lot of the mafia women.

My dad tries his best to protect me from the worst of the mafia world, but I sometimes catch the fringes of it. Like when he sounds tense on a phone call or comes home late, looking haggard. The only reason he let me go to college was so I wouldn’t have to get married right away. In our culture, I’m practically a spinster. Most women are married by the time they’re eighteen. Arranged marriages and all that.

I’m hoping my dad won’t make me marry someone right after I graduate. I want to see the world. All I’ve ever known is New York, which isn’t a bad city, but still. There’s a whole world out there, and I’ve only seen a small fraction of it.

I finish packing my books into my bag when Jeremy, one of my classmates, approaches me. “Hey, Katia. Doing anything tonight?”

“No. Why?” I’m never doing anything on any night except reading. My dad allows me to go to school but not date. He’s implied before that mafia men appreciate a pure woman. In fact, that’s what my name literally means—pure. I agreed not to get into trouble or date any boys if it meant I’d get the chance to get an education.

Jeremy shrugs and fiddles with the straps of his backpack. “There’s a party going on in the dorms tonight. Thought you’d like to come.”

A party? My dad will never agree. I can’t even sneak out with the guard outside our door every day and night. I wonder if that guard even sleeps.

“I wish I could.” I really do. “But ...” I can’t say my dad won’t approve. Normal, non-mafia people wouldn’t understand. “I’m busy.” Jeremy’s face falls. I rush to say, “But I’ll try to go.” His face lights back up.

“All right. Sounds cool. See you there.” He turns on his heel and walks away like I might bite him if he doesn’t get away fast enough. It’s cute how nervous he was talking to me. Knowing I don’t have the chance to date boys makes it easier to talk to them. Less pressure.

I leave campus behind and start my walk to the subway. My dad made it clear that I also had to live at home during college. I agreed in a heartbeat. I’d put up with anything if it meant I had the chance to get an education.

It’s early evening, and the sun is setting, casting strange shadows over everyone I pass. At one point, it feels like a pair of eyes are watching me. I look over my shoulder, but no one’s looking at me. Everyone is either on their phone or staring at their shoes. Strange. I turn back around and make my way to the subway. Once I’m on board, I open a book. But again, I feel that same prickly feeling that someone is watching me. I glance up and look around the car, but again, everyone is lost in their own thing. No one is looking at me.

I frown and look back down at my book. I concentrate so hard on it that I push the creepy feeling aside until I reach my station. I hurry out of the car and make my way above ground.

And again, as I'm walking, that same feeling of being watched. I spin around and take a moment to look, *really* look, but I don't see anyone looking at me. Maybe it's just the crowds. But I've lived in New York my entire life and never felt this sensation before.

I hurry home to our brownstone on a quiet, pretty street. By now, it's fully dark out. I nod to our guard, Sasha, who's standing watch on the front steps. Once I'm inside, I feel a sense of relief. No more sensation of someone watching me.

But then ... there's that feeling again. Inside my house.

I gasp and turn around ... only to find my dad. "Oh!"

"Sorry." He holds up his hands. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. I just got home, and ..."

I squint. "Dad? What happened to your face?" It's covered in bruises, and one eye is puffy. "Are you ok?" I touch his cheek, which makes him wince.

"I'm good, sweetheart." He gently pushes my hand away.

"No, you're clearly not good. Your face looks like someone ran over it. Who did this to you?"

"No one." He clears his throat. "Well, someone, but ... it's none of your concern. It's just ..."

"Just what?" I set my bag down.

"We need to leave. Now."

My entire body tenses. I've only ever heard my dad sound this worried once before, and it was when he got the call that Mom had died from a sudden heart attack when she was out shopping. "Why do we need to leave?"

"Please, Katia. Don't question things. We just need to go."

"No." I stand up straighter. "Dad, I've always listened to you, but right now, you're scaring me. I have a right to know what's making you so nervous. What happened?"

"Not a what. A who." He stares at me for a moment, sadness in his gaze.

“Who, Dad? Who are you afraid of?”

He sighs. “My boss. It doesn’t matter who he is.”

I don’t even know my dad’s boss’ name. I know my dad works for a questionable man, but other than that, I don’t know anything about him. I don’t even know what he looks like. My dad made sure of it.

“What about him?”

“He ...”

“Yes?”

“He wants to marry you.”

All the air leaves my body, and I slump back against the door. “What? Wait. *What?*”

“He wants to marry you.”

“Yes, I heard you, Dad. But how? Why? What?”

“I’ll explain everything. But we need to leave now.”

“To go where?”

He leans in closer and whispers, “To escape.”

“Escape?” My lips feel dull, like they’re made of stone.

“I don’t want you marrying him. He’s bad news, Katia.”

“Your boss?”

“Yes,” he says, exasperated. “We need to get away now before he comes looking for you.”

I point at his face. “Did he do that to you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, he did. Now, Katia, stop asking questions. We just need to get out of here.”

“Wait. Why does he want to marry me? You’ve kept me from your work. How does he even know who I am?”

Dad hands his head. “Because ... I might have mentioned you to him. But none of that matters. All that matters is that we get away. I’ve already packed you a bag. Now, let’s go.” He tries tugging my arm, but I’m rooted to my spot. There’s something about my dad’s urgency I don’t trust.

“So, it’s because you mentioned me to him that he now wants to marry me? That’s crazy, Dad.”

“I know. I know it is. But please, can we just go? If not, I’ll have Sasha drag you to the car.”

I take a step back. “You what?” I’ve never seen my dad so frantic. It’s ... scaring me. I’m scared of him, and I don’t quite know why.

“I’m going to get Sasha.” He turns to the door.

“Wait. Fine. I’ll go. You don’t need to drag me out.”

Dad’s shoulders slump in relief. “Thank you.” He grabs my face and kisses my cheek. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

I pull back. “Let me just grab a bag.” I run upstairs before he can stop me. What the hell is going on? Did my dad have a part to play in his boss wanting to marry me? None of this makes sense. All I know is I’m not about to leave my life behind just because my dad is scared. I can’t be forced into marriage. He has no reason to be afraid.

I sneak down the kitchen stairs and escape out the back door into our little courtyard. Normally, I would never do this, but I want to go to that party Jeremy mentioned. Maybe I should live a little. Outside, I open the gate as gently as I can, and then I break into a run down the street before Sasha or my father can see me.

Am I being crazy and reckless? Yes. But I’m also listening to my gut, and my gut is saying that my father is in the wrong to leave.

I take the subway back to the college and go to the dorms, where I ask for directions to the party and find it happening on the second floor, throughout the hallways and rooms. The common dining and kitchen area is packed with people drinking beer and smoking weed. I’m so far out of my depths

that it isn't even funny. I've always found comfort in the solitude of books. I've never been a partygoer. It's just never interested me.

But I'd rather be here, packed in with a bunch of sweaty and stoned college students, than with my dad right now. His boss beat him up and wants to marry me. My dad wants to run away from his problems. To me, it doesn't seem smart to escape from a boss who could hurt him. I'm sure my dad can come to some agreement with his boss and discourage him from wanting to marry me. I mean, his boss hasn't even met me! Why in the world would he want to marry me?

"Hey, you made it!" Jeremy approaches me, nudging past people and carrying two red cups in his hands. "You want a beer?"

"Uh, no thanks." I'm not about to drink cheap beer from a college party when I snuck out and my dad doesn't know where I am. I'm frustrated, but I'm not stupid.

"You sure?"

"Yep. I'm sure."

He shrugs. "Suit yourself." He chugs one of the cups and squishes it in his hand, then promptly drinks the other one. He burps loudly, and I wrinkle my nose at the smell. "How come you never come to parties?"

"I just don't." I glance around at all the drunk people. "And maybe it wasn't such a bright idea to come here."

"Why did you come?"

"Because I was feeling frustrated with my dad, and I just ran. I'm not normally so impulsive, but ... here I am."

"Here you are!" He wraps an arm around my shoulders. "Do you want to join me in my room?" He nods to the room across the hall from us. Two people are blatantly having sex on one of the beds. I look away, my face flushing. When I promised my dad no dating, that also meant no having sex. So, here I am, a virgin in college. It honestly doesn't bother me, and I'm not ashamed about it. It's just how the cards fell. But

that doesn't mean I'm all right with seeing two people get it on.

Jeremy glances over to his room. "Josh! Stop having sex on my bed." He looks back at me, shaking his head. "He's a punk-ass like that. Always bringing a girl over. Just because I've gotten used to it doesn't mean I like it. Do you want to go outside? Get away from all the craziness."

I look around the crowded party and nod. Fresh air sounds good.

I follow Jeremy outside, and we sit on the front steps as people walk past us. Some might just be going to their rooms to go to bed. Good luck with that huge party happening.

I wrap my arms around myself. "It was crazy in there."

"Yeah, it was. Not used to going to parties, huh?"

"Not at all. You?"

Jeremy shrugs. "Never any before college. Now I go to them all the time. The alcohol makes it easier to talk to pretty girls. Like you." He flushes. It's sort of cute. "Are you sure you don't want a beer? I can do back inside and get you one."

"I'm good. I'd just like to sit out here if that's all right." I'm still processing what my dad told me. A complete stranger wants to marry me, and by how my dad spoke, his boss seems like the kind of man who could force it. But no. I have my autonomy. Mafia women may be more caged in than normal women, but still ... I get a say. Don't I? But then, why did my dad want to escape so badly? Was it naïve of me to run away? I don't know. My dad never tells me anything about his line of work other than it's mafia-related. And he only told me that when I was eighteen and demanding answers. I know nothing of the consequences of my dad's job. Maybe I should be worried. I should probably go home and do what my dad says. It's served me well enough far.

I turn to Jeremy. "Listen, I should get going. But it was nice talking to you, ok?" As I stand up, Jeremy follows, just on shaky legs.

"Let me walk you back home."

“I got it. Really.”

“Please. Let me.”

He’s so insistent that it’s honestly annoying. How many times can I tell him no before he gets the memo? But he won’t leave me alone, so I cave in and say, “Sure.”

Drunkenly, he fist pumps the air.

As we walk down the sidewalk, Jeremy tries putting his arm around me. I keep shrugging it off.

“Can you not?”

He holds his hands up. “Sorry.” Except he doesn’t sound sorry at all.

And then he tries to put his arm around me again.

I push him off. “Stop touching me.”

“Come on, baby,” he slurs. “I know you want to.” This time, he grabs my waist and pulls me in closer.

“Stop!” I scream, pushing him away. Or at least I try to.

Jeremy and I grapple with each other. Him trying to pull me in closer. Me trying to get away.

I stumble forward when Jeremy suddenly backs up. Or more like, he’s thrown back. A man with a long scar across his face smiles at me. “Need help?”

I gasp and back away. “Um ...” I look down at Jeremy, who’s lying on the ground.

The scarred man turns to Jeremy and pulls out a gun, shooting Jeremy in the head.

What the ...?

I act on instinct, screaming and running away. He just killed Jeremy. Holy crap. He’s probably going to kill me next. Why else would you just kill someone right in front of another person without covering your face? No, this man wants me dead.

I run to the first store I see and bang on the door, but it’s dark inside. No one’s there to help me. I glance over my

shoulder and see the scarred man approaching, getting closer.

I scream as I run away. Then I remember. My phone. I pull it out of my jacket pocket and fumble with it, dialing 9-1-1. An operator answers. Before I can tell them what the issue is, I run into somebody. A man. I gasp as I run into his chest. Grabbing me, he steadies my panicked body.

“Please,” I beg. “That man is trying to kill me.” I look over my shoulder again. The scarred man stops walking. I turn back to the man whose arms I’m in. “Please, help.”

He nods. “I’ll get you to safety. But first.” He runs up to the man.

“Don’t. He has a gun!”

The scarred man lifts the gun, but my savior manages to grab it from him and pistol whip him over the head, knocking the man out. My savior pockets the gun and approaches me, grabbing my arm. “Come on. Let’s get you to safety.”

“I should get back home.”

“My home is closer. I can get you there and make sure you’re safe. We’ll call the police there.” He tugs me along, and I follow. I know I shouldn’t go into a stranger’s house, but in my panic, I’m not thinking straight. All I know is I want to get to safety.

I follow the man up a few blocks until we reach a street full of brownstones. I thought my home was nice, but it’s clear that these brownstones cost a couple of million more than my home. The man opens his door and motions for me to step inside.

It’s then that I realize I shouldn’t go inside. He’s a stranger. Albeit, a very handsome one now that I’m getting a better look at his face. He’s literally the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome.

I step back. “Sorry. I should get back home. I don’t know you.”

“Ah. Sorry. You’re right. I understand. You don’t have to come inside. Let’s just call the police and make sure you’re

ok.”

“That man killed my friend.” I mean, Jeremy wasn’t really a friend, but I don’t know a better word for him at this moment.

“I know. I saw. I was running toward you to help. Here. I’ll call the police. Ok?”

I breathe out. “Thank you. I dropped my phone when I ran into you.”

He smiles, which somehow makes him even more handsome. “No problem. I’ll call them now.” And he does. I can hear the operator ask what happened, and my savior gives a detailed account of the incident. Then he hangs up. “Police are on their way.”

“Thank you.” I nod toward his open door. I can just see inside his foyer. My god, it looks fancy in there. This man definitely has money. “And sorry about not trusting you.”

“It’s all right. I wasn’t thinking myself. I was just so focused on getting you to safety. My first thought was my home.”

“No, that makes sense.” I clear my throat. “Um ... I mean. I guess we can wait inside till the police show up.”

“Are you sure? Truly, I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.” After how Jeremy treated me and then how that scarred man tried to kill me, my savior’s attitude is a nice change of pace.

“I appreciate that. But ... I mean, you saved me. That’s a pretty good reason for trusting a person.”

“And I appreciate that.” He motions toward his house. “Please. Come in.”

And I do.

The inside of his foyer is huge. A sparkling chandelier hangs overhead. Dark wood floors. Soft but expensive-looking wallpaper.

I blink and turn back to my savior. “Sorry. You don’t even know my name, and here I am inside your home. I’m Katia.”

“Nice to meet you, Katia.” He takes my hand and holds it for a second before letting it go. I already miss his hand around mine. It’s a surreal feeling.

He continues speaking. “I’m Alek.”

CHAPTER 3

Once the police arrive, I give my statement, telling them all about the man who killed Jeremy and tried to kill me. They inform me that the man I described was gone, but they will do everything in their power to find him. After they leave, Alek lets me relax on his couch. This night has been crazy, and all I want to do is sleep.

But I still have the pressing issue of my dad to deal with.

Alek sits across from me. His living room is sleek but still cozy. I could fall asleep right here on his couch, but that would be completely inappropriate. I barely know him. Yes, he saved my life, and therefore, I trust him, but I'm not about to fall asleep in a stranger's home.

"Are you all right?" he asks, looking at me with so much concern it makes me blush. He's distractingly handsome with beautiful blue eyes and dark hair. Just the faintest tip of gray at his temples. I wonder how much older he is than I am. I really shouldn't be thinking about how handsome he is.

"Just shaken," I reply.

"That's understandable. What you've just been through—losing a friend and almost getting killed yourself—if you want to talk about it, you can."

"Thank you. But ... it's all too much right now. Actually, can I borrow your phone? I should really call my dad."

"Of course." He hands it over to me.

I dial my dad's number and walk into the foyer for privacy. Alek doesn't try to follow. At least he's a man who can respect my space.

"Katia?" Dad answers, sounding out of breath. "Where are you?"

"I'm fine. I went to a party on campus." I suck in a breath. "But then ... some man tried to kill me."

"What? Get home right now. We still need to leave."

"Why, Dad? Why are you so afraid of your boss? What can he do? Force me into marriage?"

"A man like him? Yes."

"I still don't understand why he even wants to marry me. You said you mentioned me, but that doesn't explain any of this."

He's quiet on the other line.

"Dad?"

"Don't be mad at me."

My body tenses. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"My boss knows about you because ... I sold you to him."

I laugh because this must be a joke. "What are you talking about?" When my dad doesn't return my humor, my laughter subsides. "No. Seriously. What are you talking about?"

"All of our money is gone," he blurts out. "I owed him money. So I ... offered you to him in exchange for forgiving my debts."

I blink. All the breath has left my body. This can't be real. No way. No freaking way. I glance over my shoulder to make sure Alek isn't listening before I lower my voice and ask, "This can't be for real. Dad?"

"It is. But I only offered you to him to get out of there alive. He was going to kill me, sweetheart. I made sure to get back home, and that's why I wanted you to run away with me.

I'm going to get you to safety. I promise. We'll go into hiding."

"You think that will solve this problem? If a man like your boss wants you dead, don't you think he can find us? And ..."

I blink harder, feeling tears form at the corners of my eyes.

"You sold me to a man for money. How could you? How *could* you?"

"I know, sweetheart." Anguish is in his voice. "But I did it to protect both of us. I swear. But I'll hide you away so he'll never find you. You just need to come back home now."

"No." The word is out before I can stop it.

"What?"

"Why would I come back home? How can I trust you?"

"I'm your father. You can always trust me."

"You sold me to another man," I hiss. "I'll never trust you again after this. It sounds like money problems are your problems. Why don't you deal with it and leave me out of it?"

"If there's no money, who's going to pay for your school?"

"It's my last semester. It's already paid for. So don't try to pull that card on me. This is your problem. Your mess to fix. Just leave me out of it."

"Please. Just come home."

"No." I hang up before I can say anything I might regret. I stand there for a moment before my legs buckle, and I kneel on the ground. I thought I could always trust my dad, but he's proven otherwise. I knew he worked for shady people but not much else. He kept his work and that life from me. But now that life has come back to bite him in the ass, and *I'm* supposed to fix the problem for him? I'm my own woman. Not some slave to be sold off to the highest bidder.

There's no way I can look at him again. At least not for a while. Which means I can't go home yet.

I push myself back up and turn around. I yelp when I see Alek standing there.

“Sorry.” He gives me a charming smile. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

I open my mouth to speak, but all that comes out is a sob, and before I know it, I’m crying. I cry so hard my body shivers and shakes. Alek watches me with concern before gently putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

I shake my head, crying harder.

“Come here.” He pulls me into a hug, which startles me at first, but I give in. It feels nice to be comforted after everything that happened. Maybe Alek and I are a little past being strangers at this point. I barely know him, and yet I already trust him more than I do my dad. Or maybe that’s just my hurt talking. Either way, I don’t pull out of Alek’s arms as I cry.

Finally, once my tears have subsided, Alek lets me go. “Feel a little better?”

I nod, wiping at my tear-stained cheeks. “How embarrassing. Crying in front of a man I barely know.”

He smiles. “I saved your life. I think it’s all right for you to cry in front of me. I won’t judge.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you need to get back home, or ...?”

I huff. “I don’t know. I can’t go back home right now. I’ll probably find a hotel to stay in for the night.” But Dad mentioned that all our money is gone. Crap. Maybe even that’s out of the question.

“Stay here.”

“What?”

Alek shrugs, stuffing his hands in his pockets and giving me a good look at his forearms—who knew a man’s forearms could look so sexy? “Stay here tonight. You’re exhausted. I have a guest bedroom.”

“But I barely know you.”

“True. But you trust me, don’t you?” A gleam enters his eye that I can’t quite make out.

Maybe I’ll regret this later, but I’m trusting my gut. “I do.”

“Great. Then stay the night. If you’re truly uncomfortable, I can pay for a hotel room if you’d like.”

“No, here’s ... fine.”

“Wonderful. Then let me show you to your room.” He leads me upstairs, filled with more finery and expensive furnishings, to the guest bedroom, which is larger than my own room. It’s decorated in off-whites, making the space look like you could snuggle right into it.

Alek and I stand in the doorway, so close to almost touching. “It’s beautiful,” I tell him.

“Thank you. I’m glad that you trust me, Katia.”

I smile as I meet his gaze. He’s looking at me with so much intensity I have to resist the urge to look away. His eyes drop down to my lips and back up to my face. I gulp. No way. There’s no way this man would want to kiss me.

I suck in a breath and lean in a fraction. Alek does the same. We both hold still for a moment.

Then my brain gets the better of me. I look away, breaking the moment between us. I can’t kiss a man I just met. In fact, I’ve never kissed any man before. It must just be all this adrenaline coursing through me, causing me to act differently. Braver. More impulsive.

Alek clears his throat. “Well. I’ll leave you to it, then. The door does lock from the inside if that makes you feel better. I want you to be comfortable here.” He pats the doorframe once. “Goodnight, Katia. I hope you have sweet dreams.”

“I hope so, too,” I whisper. I hurry into the bedroom and shut the door behind me, sighing once I’ve locked it. Who is this mystery man who saved me from a killer and has riches beyond compare and a handsome face almost too beautiful to look at? Did I stumble into a fairytale when I wasn’t looking?

After slipping my shoes off, I collapse onto the bed and immediately fall asleep.

I WAKE UP WITH A GASP, unsure of where I am. Then it all comes back to me. Jeremy getting murdered. Getting chased by a killer. My dad selling me to his boss to pay off his debts. And Alek saving me. Alek. Oh my god. I can't believe I cried in his arms last night. I also can't believe I spent the night at his place. Who am I? Because I barely recognize myself. But then again, I barely recognize my dad, who betrayed my trust spectacularly.

I open the door slowly, peeking out into the hallway. I'm not sure why. It's just strange to be walking around a stranger's home. I work up the courage to step into the hallway when a woman steps out of another door. I gasp and step back. The woman is older than me—maybe in her forties. With a short stature, she doesn't even come up to my chin, and I'm on the shorter side as is. Her dark brown hair has a couple of wisps of gray in it, but her skin is clear and unwrinkled.

She looks at me with wide eyes before scurrying down the hallway.

Who is she? It's not really my place to know. Maybe Alek already had a woman over last night and just invited me to spend the night out of generosity. I have no claim to him. And yet, the thought that he had a woman over while I was here doesn't sit right with me.

I walk downstairs and see the woman slip into the kitchen. I follow because I don't know what else to do. In the kitchen, I find Alek sitting at the breakfast table, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. Who reads the newspaper still?

“Ah, Katia. I was wondering when you'd wake up.” He sets the paper down. “Do you want a cup of coffee?”

“Um ... sure?”

“Please. Have a seat.” He turns to the woman who’s now cooking eggs on the stove. “Mila, can you make Katia a cup?”

“Right away, sir.” She turns on the coffee pot before resuming cooking.

I sit at the table across from Alek.

“Mila is my maid,” he explains before I can ask. His maid. Of course. Here I was jumping to conclusions. Now I feel almost sillier. “Been working for me for over fifteen years now.”

“I ran into her upstairs,” I say.

“You probably scared poor Mila. She jumps like a deer most of the time.”

Mila smiles tightly as she sets a cup in front of me. The warm smell of coffee emanates from it. She then sets a plate filled with an omelet in front of Alek.

“Did you want any breakfast?” he asks me, digging into his food.

“I am hungry,” I admit.

“Mila, make an omelet for Katia.”

“Of course, sir.” She goes back to the stove and begins to cook. It’s weird. I’m used to cooking for my dad and me. Ever since I was old enough to cook, he encouraged me to cook for us. He claimed that a man couldn’t cook for himself. A woman had to do it. He also told me that it would better my chances of making a good match. While I thought his reasoning was old school, I also thought it was a practical skill to have.

“Um, I’m a vegan,” I tell him. “I can’t eat an omelet.”

Alek stares at me blankly before turning to Mila and saying, “Make something vegan for Katia, then.” He turns back to me. “Any plans for the day?” he asks.

Other than avoiding my father? “Not really. It’s the weekend, so no school.”

He tilts his head to the side and looks at me with those disarming eyes. “You’re in school?”

“Getting my bachelor’s in English Literature. It’s not the most practical of degrees, but I love to read, so I figured it would be the best fit for me.”

“You didn’t pursue a degree that would better your chances at a job?”

I flush. Mila sets a plate filled with nothing but lettuce in front of me. I give her a tight smile before she turns away. Ok, clearly, they know nothing about veganism. Mila begins to wipe down the counters. “A job was never in the future for me. My dad—” The word gets caught in my throat. “He always said I would be married soon. That was supposed to be my job. To be a housewife. But I figured I could at least get a degree. He gave me that.” I frown. “But now he’s promised me to some man I’ve never met, and I’m scared. I refuse to marry a man I don’t know.”

Alek places his hand over mine, and I try not to react. Play it cool. Play it cool. “That’s understandable. You want to feel love for the man you’re marrying.”

“Yes. Absolutely. So, I’m not insane for thinking otherwise?” I don’t know why, but I need his affirmation. I’m not insane for wanting a choice about my future.

As he squeezes my hand, goosebumps break out over my arm. “You’re not crazy. In fact, I think you’re a smart young woman. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

If I’m not mistaken, Alek is ... flirting with me. I didn’t see that coming. Not that I’m complaining about it.

I’d promised my dad I wouldn’t date if I got to go to college, but now that he’s betrayed me, there’s no harm in doing what I want. And what I want right now is to get to know Alek better.

“You must think I’m forward,” he says, removing his hand. I feel the loss of it keenly.

“No,” I blurt out. “No, not at all.”

He smiles that charming smile of his. “Then, would you like to go on a date with me today?”

My mouth drops open. I quickly close it before I look like an idiot. “Really?”

“I know we just met, but I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I would love to take you out on a date. If you say yes?”

How can I refuse?

“Yes,” I say.

“Wonderful.”

“But I have nothing to wear. Just this.” I motion toward my simple top and jeans. I hadn’t bothered dressing up for the party since I was in a hurry to leave my dad. And no one dresses up to go to college classes. Everyone wears either jeans or sweats.

“You look beautiful. But let me treat you. After everything you’ve been through within the past twenty-four hours, it’s the least I can do.”

“Treat me how?”

And that’s how I ended up outside a luxury clothing store with Alek an hour later. “Alek, this is too much. You let me spend the night at your place. Now you’re offering to buy me clothes. It really is too much.”

“I have a lot of money.” He says it like it’s no big deal. “I’d like to spend some of it on you. For our date. Give me that.”

I sigh and nod. “All right. For our date.” Which I still can’t believe we’re going on, but I’m in no way complaining about it. I like Alek, and I’m excited to go on a date.

Alek touches my back gently as I walk into the store. I remember how nice his arms felt around me as he comforted me when I cried. I wouldn’t mind feeling more of his touch on me. I never gave much thought to the boys I went to school with, but Alek is nothing like them. He’s successful, incredibly handsome, and sweet.

A part of me is warning me not to accept all this generosity. He might expect more things from me. But so far,

he's seemed genuine.

"Where are we going on our date?" I ask once we're browsing through the store.

"I was thinking a carriage ride in Central Park, and then we could eat at one of my restaurants."

"Trying to show off?"

"It is bad I want to impress you?" He leans close enough that I can smell his warm cologne. If he were to kiss me right now, I wouldn't pull away as I did last night. Why did I pull away last night? I'm kicking myself for that.

"No," I whisper.

"Then good. Because I want to impress you. And there's no better restaurant in town than one of mine."

"How many restaurants do you own?"

"Three."

"Three?" I shake my head while I look through clothes. "That *is* impressive."

"I also own five hotels and a few different clubs."

"So, you're a businessman."

"That's the best way to describe what I do, yes."

"And here I am, just a college student. I can't help but feel a little inadequate."

"You're no such thing." He trails his fingertips over my arm. I don't pull away. "Now, let's find you a dress to wear so we can start our date."

AN HOUR LATER, I'm wearing a pretty blue sundress while looking at the horse-drawn carriage Alek rented for the day. Normally, I oppose things like this. Using horses for people's entertainment, but Alek has gone to such lengths to make me happy on this date, and I don't want to ruin it. The way he

looked at me when I stepped out in my dress made me shiver. I've never felt such a strong pull to anyone before. Of course, it had to be to Mr. Tall, Dark, Rich, and Handsome. Maybe I'm sacrificing my beliefs for a man, but when a man like Alek pays attention to you, you eat it up.

"You don't think this is too much?" I ask him, nodding at the carriage.

"Nothing is ever too much when it comes to me. And I want to treat you. You had a rough night. You deserve a good day."

He grips my hand to help me up into the carriage. My heart beats faster at his touch. Alek settles next to me before telling the driver to take off. The people mingling around Central Park look at us as we pass by. Some smile. Some roll their eyes. Either way, I don't care. I'm just excited to be next to a man like Alek. He's so sweet and attentive. I'm amazed he's single. Maybe that should be a concern. No, I remind myself. Don't overthink this. Just live in the moment for once in my life.

But I can't for long before I have to ask, "Why are you single?"

Alek chuckles. "Getting to the real questions, huh?"

"A man like you ... I'm amazed you don't have a girlfriend or wife."

"A man like me?" He rests his arm around my shoulders, and I sink into his side.

"Yeah, you know, wealthy, handsome, nice." I flush at my words, especially when he smiles wider.

"You think I'm handsome?"

I duck my head. "Maybe."

He lifts my chin with his fingers. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. I already told you how beautiful I find you."

I sigh slightly. I swear, I'm in a dream. "Then it must have been fate that we met each other?"

“You really are a reader, aren’t you?”

I smile wider. “I really am.”

“Then yes, if you believe it was fate, then it must have been fate.” He cups my cheek and lowers his lips closer to mine. “I couldn’t be happier that I’m the one who saved you.”

“Me, too,” I whisper.

And then, finally, on a carriage ride in Central Park, while my life is chaos back home, Alek kisses me. And it’s everything I could have ever dreamed of in a first kiss. It’s soft and gentle but also firm and passionate.

I clutch his shirt, pulling him in closer. I can feel him smile against my lips.

When we finally part, I smile even bigger. Alek returns it.

Nothing could be better than this.

CHAPTER 4

Katia

I'm still on a high after mine and Alek's kiss, even after our date is over. I think I'll be on a high for the rest of my life.

Kissing Alek has been the most pleasant and exciting thing to happen to me. My dad denied me a lot when it came to dating, but now I don't really care what he thinks. If he's going to sell me into marriage with a stranger, then he doesn't really get an opinion about what I do. Or who I date.

Alek doesn't know about my lack of experience. I'll tell him in the future, but for now, I just want to live in bliss. A handsome, wealthy man has taken an interest in me. I'm not messing that up for anything.

Over the next few weeks, I stay at Alek's house at his invitation. I just can't go home and face my dad, and money is too tight for a hotel. It's a little crazy that I'm technically living with him, but I have my own room, and Alek is good about boundaries.

Life is a whirlwind. Alek and I go on date after date. We don't do anything other than kiss. He hasn't even tried to touch me below my neck. I'm curious why, but I do think it's best that we take things slow.

We learn about each other more on our dates, though I've noticed that Alek likes to keep things a little more surface-level when it comes to our talks. I'm so caught up in the excitement of being with him that I don't bother questioning things.

He's so attentive, though. He makes an effort to make sure my vegan meals are more than just lettuce. He never gets annoyed with me or makes me feel bad about myself. Alek is an all-around good man.

Every time my dad calls, I ignore it. I have no desire to talk to the man who thought he could sell me to his boss.

One morning, Alek asks me on another date, and I gladly agree.

"Where are we going this time?" I ask, slipping on my coat. I'm wearing a satiny lavender dress that ends right above my knees. I noticed Alek eyeing me when I came down. But still, he hasn't tried to touch me. Only simple kisses. The kisses are great, mind you. I just can't help but wonder about doing more.

And that's another thing about Alek—he likes to buy me clothes. Ever since our first date, he's taken me out shopping to buy the most beautiful dresses way out of my price range. I tell myself he's not trying to buy me. I hope he's just genuine with his gestures.

"I wanted to take you to one of my clubs. It's exclusive. Not overcrowded and loud. I think you'll like it." That's another thing Alek is good at—paying attention to what makes me comfortable.

"Sounds great."

We arrive at the club called The Lounge, a simple name for it. Inside, it's decorated in rich brown tones with dark lighting that creates a sexy atmosphere. Only a small number of people—probably no more than fifty—mingle in the room. Everyone looks so sophisticated. I feel a little out of place, but then I remind myself I'm with Alek. And I'm wearing a thousand-dollar dress. I have the right to be here.

The hostess takes mine and Alek's coats. I notice she eyes Alek, but he doesn't even look in her direction, which makes me happy. We haven't had the talk if we're allowed to see other people or if we're exclusive yet. I'm so new to dating that I don't know all the ins and outs of it yet. So, Alek

wouldn't be doing anything wrong if he wanted to see other women. I just hope he doesn't.

So far, he's shown he only has eyes for me. When he's not at work and I'm not at school, we spend all our time together, mostly talking but sometimes kissing. I can't imagine he has time for anyone else. Also, at school, my semester is coming to an end, and I've been busier than usual. I've also had to deal with Jeremy's death since everyone keeps asking me about that night. It's distracted me, but when Alek and I are together, he's all I can think about. No more seeing Jeremy's death; I only see Alek's beautiful blue eyes.

Alek takes my hand and guides me deeper into the lounge. He approaches the bar and orders a whisky for himself, then turns to ask me what I want.

"Uh ... I don't drink much. I don't know what to have." Another thing my dad made me promise not to do—get drunk and go to parties. Mostly, don't get drunk at parties. I flush, feeling silly that I don't even know what drink to order. All of our dates so far have been doing something out and about or at a restaurant. This is the first time Alek has taken me to a lounge like this.

Alek places his hand on my back and smiles reassuringly. "No worries. What do you think my date will like?" he asks the bartender.

The bartender, a young man with curly hair, looks me over. "I'm thinking a gin spritz."

"That's so specific," I say.

He smiles. "I know my drinks and my customers. I can spot the type of drink someone will like just by looking at them. Let me get that for you." He winks. Alek's hand on my back clenches slightly before relaxing. Did he not like the fact that the bartender winked at me? Why does that make me pleased?

The bartender passes Alek's glass over before giving me my gin spritz. It's pink and cute looking. I take a sip and taste floral and fruity notes. "Mmm. It's good."

The bartender gives me another wink. “I told you.”

“Come along, Katia,” Alek says, motioning me from the bar. “Let’s take a seat.”

We settle into a dark booth near the back of the room. From here, I can see the entirety of the lounge.

I drink more of my gin spritz, giggling at the taste. Or maybe that’s from the alcohol. Since I haven’t tried much alcohol before, I suspect I might be a lightweight.

Alek rests his arm behind me on the booth. There’s not an inch between our legs. It feels good sitting next to a man as powerful as him.

“Did you like his attention?” Alek asks in a low voice.

“Who?”

“The bartender. He seemed to like you.”

I nudge him. “Are you jealous?”

Instead of giving me his charming smile, Alek looks at me with a serious expression. “Answer my question, Katia.”

I blink, stunned by his behavior. He’s been nothing but sweet to me in the few weeks we’ve known each other. “No. He seemed harmless. I didn’t really give him much thought.” I take another sip.

Alek relaxes though there’s still a small bit of tension in his body. I’m not sure if I like that. “Good. And yes, I was jealous, to answer your question. That’s something you need to know about me. I get jealous easily.”

“You’ve never mentioned that before.”

“I didn’t have a need to before. I haven’t taken you anywhere that involved interacting with other people.”

“True. We’ve been pretty contained, haven’t we?” Another sip. “I don’t mind, though. I like spending time with you.”

“Do you, now?” His voice becomes husky, sending a shiver through me.

“I wouldn’t be living at your house if I hated you.”

His lips twitch. “No, I guess you wouldn’t be.” He rests his hand on my knee. It’s the most he’s ever touched me below my neck, and I want to feel more. “Now, I have another question for you. What do you think of our relationship?”

“We have a relationship?”

“I like to think so.”

“I do, too,” I blurt out. This time, I take a larger gulp. Wow, this tastes good. The edges of my vision are getting a little fizzy. Maybe I should stop drinking ... I take another sip for good measure.

“Good.” He squeezes my knee. “What do you think of taking our relationship to the next level?”

A pulse of excitement shoots through my core. “The next level?”

He slides his hand up to my thigh. “Yes.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I whisper. Another gulp from my drink. It’s almost gone now. I could really go for another. No. I need to focus.

He leans in close and brushes his lips against mine. “Good.”

I part my lips, ready for him to kiss me harder when someone calls out Alek’s name. We pull apart and look at the person approaching.

He’s just as handsome as Alek is, but instead of Alek’s darker features, his hair is a light shade of brown and his eyes are green. He also has the tiniest bit of stubble. Their physiques are similar, with the same broad shoulders and the same height.

“Mikhail,” Alek says, standing up to shake his hand. “Good to see you here.”

“Oh, you know. Thought I’d go out and have some fun tonight.” His eyes land on me. “Who is this beautiful creature?” He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it before I can react. Alek watches Mikhail and me closely. It’s a little unsettling.

I gently pull my hand back. “Katia,” I tell him.

“Katia.” He rolls my name on his tongue like he’s tasting it. “Beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

“Mikhail, enough.” Alek sits back next to me, placing his hand on my knee. It feels purposeful this time like he’s laying claim to me. “Katia and I were enjoying our date. Was there something you needed to talk to me about?”

He settles in the booth across from us. “No. I just saw you and came over.” He looks back at me. “How are you liking Alek? I know he can be a little difficult at times.”

I frown right as Alek tenses beside me. “Alek’s been a perfect gentleman to me. Not difficult at all.”

Mikhail laughs like I just told a joke when I know for a fact I didn’t. “Right. Well, I’ll give you a piece of advice, be careful of this one.”

“Mikhail,” Alek growls. I’ve never heard him sound so ... angry before. Then again, I’ve only known him for a short amount of time.

“Just saying.” He smiles as he looks between Alek and me. It’s a look that tells me he knows something I don’t, and I don’t like that. It makes me uncomfortable. “Well, I’ll leave you two to your date.” He slaps the table gently before standing up and walking away, whistling as he goes.

“He’s ... weird,” I say.

“Yes, he can be.”

“Who is he?”

“He works for me.”

“Wow. He seemed pretty comfortable talking to his boss like that.”

“Mikhail knows his place.”

I try to look into Alek’s eyes, but he’s staring straight ahead. “What did he mean that I need to be careful with you? Alek?”

He finally looks at me, giving me that charming smile I love. “Nothing. Mikhail just likes to joke around.” He squeezes my knee. “Now, where were we?”

And just like that, the strange encounter with Mikhail is forgotten. “We were talking about ... taking things to the next level?” I whisper.

“Yes, we were. I wanted to ask you something, but I’ll wait till we’re in private. For now, I just want to enjoy our time together.”

“You make it sound like it’s coming to an end.”

“No. It’s not. I just meant that things might change between us soon.”

My heart skips a beat. “For better or worse.”

“Oh, I’m hoping for the better,” he says, his tone deepening. The sound of it goes straight to my core. His fingers tap against my knee. I’m feeling lightheaded and dizzy. Probably from the alcohol. But also from Alek’s enticing ... everything.

I gasp as he brushes his lips against mine again.

But then, just as before, we get interrupted again.

“Alek, so good to see you.” It’s a woman’s voice.

I turn at the sound and see some pretty blonde woman who looks like the epitome of class and wealth.

“Madison,” Alek says, sounding weary.

She stops short when she sees me. “Oh, didn’t see you there.” The laugh she gives off sounds like the braying of a horse. Or maybe I’m just petty. Or maybe I’m a little bit drunk now.

“Madison, nice to see you again, but I’m busy here,” Alek says pointedly.

Madison frowns, which her pump lips even plumper. “Sorry. Just wanted to say I haven’t seen you in a while. Was wondering if you wanted to ... catch up?” Is that a euphemism? It’s probably a euphemism.

“No.” His bluntness makes Madison look taken aback. “Now, if you don’t mind walking away ...”

Madison shoots me a look before turning on her heels awkwardly and leaving us be.

“That was weird,” I say.

Alek sighs. “Sorry about that.”

“No, don’t be. Who was she?”

“In the past.” He squeezes my knee again. “No one you need to worry about.”

“We haven’t discussed our past relationships yet.”

“And we don’t have to. None of that matters to me. Does it for you?”

I lean into him. “No. As long as you say that all the women you’ve dated are in the past, then ... I have no reason to be bothered.”

“Good. And the men in your past don’t bother me.”

“There are no men in my past,” I blurt out. Stupid alcohol.

Alek smiles like the cat that ate the canary. “I say we go back home.” Home, as in I live there when I know I don’t. It’s only a temporary living situation with Alek. The thought makes me incredibly sad. I could stay in this fairytale with him forever.

We leave the lounge behind and go back to his house. The minute we step foot into the foyer, Alek wraps his arms around me and kisses me with a passion he’s never had with me. Our kisses are normally sweet and gentle, but this one has a roughness to it that startles me.

Alek pulls back. “Sorry. I couldn’t resist. Seeing you all evening in this tight dress and knowing that all the other men in the room wanted a bite out of you made me feel unhinged.”

“I didn’t see other men looking at me.”

“Trust me, Katia. They were.” He kisses me hard again, and I gasp as he presses me against the wall. “You make me

feel crazy,” he growls.

“Is that a good thing?”

He just smiles darkly before kissing me again. “I want all of you,” he says against my lips.

I gulp. Am I ready for that? “Ok,” I whisper.

“I don’t just mean sex, Katia. I mean you. I want all of you.” Then he says something that rocks me to my core. “Marry me. Say you’ll marry me.”

I stare at him for a few seconds. “But we’ve only known each a couple of weeks.”

“When you know, you know. And I know I want all of you. But I won’t take you unless you’re my wife.”

“Are you saving yourself for marriage?” I ask dubiously.

He chuckles. “No. I’m saving *you* for marriage. Marry me and become mine. We already live together. Nothing needs to change. Say yes.”

Holy crap. He’s actually asking me to marry him. It’s crazy if I say yes, isn’t it? I mean, we only just met a couple of weeks ago. But then, I think about my dad and how he tried to marry me off to his boss. If I marry Alek, then he could be my escape from that. I always knew I’d marry young. As my dad explained, it’s the culture we live in. But I can’t marry Alek just because I’m in a tough spot. Then again, I’m also starting to have strong feelings for him. Shoot. I already have strong feelings for him. I think I might even love him. He’s my savior, after all. Marriage with him could be a win-win. I’d get to be with a man who’s so sweet and charming while also getting protection from my dad’s boss. That man, whoever he is, can’t force me into a marriage when I’m already married. Sounds like a plan to me.

So, I inhale deeply and say a word that will forever change my life.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 5

Alek

I own her now. Katia is my prisoner, and she doesn't even know it.

My plan worked. I knew the minute Grigor left my club that he'd try running away with her, and I couldn't let that happen. I immediately sent my spies to keep an eye on Grigor and Katia and concocted the perfect plan.

I made myself look like Katia's savior. I sent Yuri, my best man who deals with things I don't want to deal with, after her with the plan to try and kill her. Of course, I made sure he knew that he was not supposed to *actually* hurt her. That's my job. Yuri can be unpredictable, that bastard. I hadn't planned on him killing that boy, Jeremy, but it worked out. I can't have any other men laying their hands on my woman. Katia literally ran into my arms and has stayed there ever since.

I didn't want her to fight me, so I put on my best charming smile and won her heart in a matter of weeks. Grigor would be so disappointed in his daughter. Katia still doesn't know my true identity, and I don't plan on her finding out until after we're married. Because once we're married, I'll have complete control of her.

It's in my nature not to care about people. I use them, then discard them.

With Katia, I was taken by her beauty and innocence. The minute I saw her picture, I knew I wanted her as my wife—someone I could toy with, be my plaything.

I want to hurt her. Break her down until she only thinks of me and me alone. I also want to pleasure her. I've resisted fucking her so far. It only seems fitting to wait until we're married. I can't risk taking her innocence and then losing her. Besides, it's exciting knowing she's a virgin. I want her to stay like that a little longer, to draw out the anticipation. I'm all about the long game. Always have been.

And with Katia, there will be nothing sweeter than showing her who I truly am and making her obsessed with me. Right now, she thinks I'm her prince charming. In reality, I'm her captor and her nightmare. Soon, she'll see that. I've already won her heart by being nice. Now, I want to win her over by being myself—cruel, ruthless, and cold.

Just goes to show what kind of actor I am—a good one. I've put on a front for a few weeks now. Only a little longer till the wedding, and once we're married, I can let my mask slip.

But the first order of business is planning the actual wedding. I call in all my contacts to have the wedding ready in a week. I can't have Katia convincing herself that we're moving too fast. She cannot back out now.

I noticed right away that she has a fairly good head on her shoulders for being so sheltered. If she continues to be that smart, she'll wake up from her dream and decide not to marry me.

I want her to agree to marry me. It'll make the whole thing that much sweeter. Once she sees the real me, she'll know she was the one to agree to the marriage. I can always say that I never forced her into it. Just another way I'll have power over her.

The morning after Katia said yes to my proposal, she comes downstairs looking hungover. Her red hair is a mess, and her eyes are a little bloodshot. Even still, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I tamper down my smirk, knowing she's so close to being mine.

"How are you feeling this morning?" I ask as she sits across from me.

“Not good. Being hungover isn’t fun.”

“I would think not.”

“How are you not? You had a drink last night.”

“My tolerance is a lot higher than yours. And I never let myself get drunk. I don’t like to feel out of control.”

She ducks her head. “Alek, listen ... about last night.”

Here we go. She’s already having second thoughts. That just won’t do.

“Are you sure we should get married so soon?” she asks. “Maybe we could date a little longer.”

I’m hoping my next move will damper her doubts.

“Katia,” I say, taking her hand. “I know I want you to be my wife. I knew the minute I met you. I had to protect you. Something tells me that I still need to protect you.”

She looks away. There is it. She knows I’m right. I also know she’s running from what her father told her. I had one of my contacts hack her phone records and was able to listen in to her conversation with her father. I know she’s frustrated with him and how he tried to sell her to his boss. Of course, she has no idea *I’m* her father’s boss. The deception makes me excited. If I can convince her that I’ll protect her, she’ll be more likely to agree to this wedding.

“Am I wrong?” I ask.

“No,” she says quickly, placing her hand over mine. “No. You’re right. You’ve done nothing but protect me. I’m so happy to have you in my life.”

“I also have something for you.” I stand up and pull a ring box out of my pocket. I bought the ring right after I saw Katia’s picture. Katia’s eyes widen when I kneel before her. “I didn’t ask you right last night. But now, I want to make sure you feel special. I want you to know that I’m taking this seriously.” I open the box, and Katia gasps. The ring is a princess-cut diamond with a rose gold finish. I knew it would look pretty against her fair skin. “So, will you marry me, Katia? Make me the happiest man on earth.” Saying all these

sweet words makes me want to fucking vomit, but I'll say them for her. I need to win her over.

Katia smiles wide. "This is all crazy, but ... ok. Yes!" She kisses me, then pulls back as I slip the ring on her shaky finger.

"It looks perfect on you."

"We're really doing this?"

"We really are."

And just like that, I've won her over again.

OUR WEDDING DAY couldn't come soon enough, even though it only took a week to plan. I had hundreds of people working on it to make sure it was perfect. Katia expressed reservations about the short engagement, but again, I reinforced my need to protect her, which seemed to calm her down. I told her she only needed to worry about choosing a dress, and I would handle the rest. She looked relieved when I told her this.

Katia also brought up the topic of us sleeping in the same room together, but I told her we'd wait until after the wedding. Even though it's clear she's attracted to me, I can tell she also appreciates how I'm respecting her boundaries. It makes her feel safer, which means she trusts me more. Exactly what I want.

Soon, Katia won't have any boundaries with me. I'll strip them all away until she's nothing but a shell for me to play with. My own perfect little toy who's completely obedient to me.

The wedding is being held in the grandest space I could find. I paid a lot for it since I want our wedding day to be perfect. Katia needs to be wowed by the spectacle. The more impressed she is, the more she'll fall in love with me. Which means when I break her down, the more it will hurt.

On the day of, I go to the venue, an older classical hotel in the heart of the city, and greet guests as they come. I told Mila to help Katia get ready and make sure she arrives on time. I can't wait to see my bride in her dress. It'd better be spectacular. I paid a lot for it.

Mikhail approaches, wearing a light gray suit. I'm in dark navy, my color of choice. "I can't believe you're getting married so soon," he says with a smirk.

I smile tightly at him. "Why did you flirt with my wife the other night?" In the chaos of wedding planning, I hadn't had time to address that with him.

"I didn't flirt."

"You kissed her hand. And you looked at her like you wanted to take a bite out of her."

Mikhail shrugs. "Katia is beautiful."

I give him a flat look.

He laughs, and I hate how cavalier he is. "Calm down, Alek. I won't take a bite out of your wife." His tone implies he'd like to take more than just a bite.

"Are you going to be trouble?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"First, the whole business deal with Gabriel Rossi, and now, you're putting your eyes and hands on my wife."

"She's not your wife yet."

I scowl, giving him a hard look. "Mikhail, you're my second in command. But that doesn't mean I won't put you down like a dog if you fuck up. You hear me?"

His eyes widen, then he clears his throat. "Yeah. Yes. I hear you. Now, you better get into position. I'd hate for you to be late for your own wedding." He pats my back and enters the ballroom where the ceremony is being held. I glance inside—over two hundred people so far. When you're the leader of the Bratva, a lot of people know you, and you have to give them a show. A large wedding signals wealth, which is a sign of

strength in our culture. And I never want anyone to think I'm anything other than the most powerful man in the room.

After the last guest arrives, I make my way down the aisle and take my place at the front of the room, waiting for Katia to enter. Mila texted me earlier, letting me know that Katia was dressed and arriving soon.

A few minutes later, the music swells, and the doors open, signaling everyone to stand as Katia enters. She's alone. I purposefully didn't invite her dad, and she made it clear she didn't want him to come.

Her hair hangs around her shoulders in soft waves. Her dress' bodice has a sweetheart neckline and wraps around her body beautifully. The sleeves are long and off the shoulder, giving just the tiniest hint of sexiness. The skirt is flowy without being too tight or too loose. Katia looks elegant yet understated. Just the way she is.

She holds a bouquet tightly. I can tell even from where I'm standing. The guests look impressed as she walks down the aisle. They've never seen her, and I made sure not to introduce her to anyone. I didn't want her to find out accidentally or not that I'm her father's boss. The truth needs to be revealed after she's tied to me through marriage. None of the guests are hers, either. She didn't have anyone to invite—no friends, and her only family is her father. Perfect. No one will look for her when I claim all of her. Grigor will be easy to deal with if he causes a fuss. I can just kill him.

When Katia reaches me, I take her hand in mine. I give her my best and calmest smile to help ease her nerves. She cannot get cold feet. I will not allow it.

The officiant, John Sampson, the same man who officiated my parents' wedding years ago and now looks a little worse for wear, clears his throat. As everyone quietens and the music stops, he begins the ceremony.

I stare into Katia's eyes as John drones on. I'm only interested in the "I dos." That will be the moment Katia becomes mine forever.

She gives me a small smile. It's clear she's nervous, but excitement radiates off her. Which gives me hope. She wants this almost as much as I do, though for very different reasons. She thinks she's marrying a good man. But what she's really getting is a monster.

When the time comes for us to recite our vows, I say mine with confidence. Katia does the same, even though her voice is a little shaky. I love knowing I didn't have to force her into marriage. She walked right into my trap. Poor little lamb.

"Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" John asks.

"I do." The smile Katia gives in response makes me feel like a motherfucking king. I have this woman in the palm of my hand.

John turns to Katia. "And do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Katia takes in a deep breath and says, "I do."

"You may now kiss the bride," John announces.

I gently take Katia's face in my hands and give her a soft, lingering kiss. It's going to be the last bit of softness she ever gets from me.

We pull back and smile at each other while the guests cheer.

And there we are. She's mine, and she doesn't even know she should be afraid.

EVERYONE GOES into another ballroom for the reception. I didn't hold back. It's decorated entirely in crystals and other finery. I wanted it to look like a fairytale, something out of a storybook. I did it for Katia, knowing it would be her last taste of magic in a long time. Soon, she'll be dragged back to reality as she learns what kind of man I really am.

Katia gasps when she steps into the room, gripping my arm. “Alek. Oh my god. This is stunning.”

“I knew you’d like it.”

“I love it.”

I lean in and kiss her. “I’m glad. Now, let’s enjoy the party.”

She laughs. “You know, I’m not much of a party person, but I think I can get behind this.”

I pull her onto the dance floor for our first dance. It’s a simple waltz. I’m not the type of person to choreograph a silly dance number. I have a ruthless reputation to uphold, and ruthless men don’t do the running man or twerk or any other stupid dance move.

Katia melts into my arms with a soft smile. Oh, poor girl. She doesn’t know how good she has it right now.

Once we finish our dance, people join us on the dance floor, but Katia looks uncomfortable, so I suggest we sit down. She looks relieved. I do that for her. Her protector. Knowing I’m the furthest thing from a protector is laughable.

Mikhail approaches us once we’re seated. “Congratulations.”

“Mikhail,” I warn, knowing he might try something stupid.

And he does exactly that.

“Would the bride like to dance?” he asks Katia, holding out his hand.

Katia looks between Mikhail and me. “Um ...”

“She only dances with me,” I tell Mikhail.

“Come on. Surely she wants to dance.” He looks at Katia expectantly.

Katia looks uncomfortable but nods anyway. “I guess.”

Fuck. I can’t object without looking like a jealous asshole. I still need Katia to see me as her prince. Just until I can get her alone back home ...

“Great!” Mikhail takes her hand and drags her onto the dance floor. I watch as he tries putting his hands on her waist. She keeps gently pushing him back. Eventually, they settle into swaying next to each other, not touching. Already Katia is proving herself to be my good girl. That will help making her submit to me.

Mikhail leans in close to Katia and says something. I can see his lips move but can't make out what he's saying. Katia frowns and looks back at me. Then she shakes her head and walks out of the ballroom. I immediately follow.

I find Katia in the hallway, leaning against the wall. “What happened?”

She jumps, clutching at her chest. “Alek.”

“Did Mikhail say something to you?”

She looks away. “It's ... not important.”

“No, tell me what he said. It was bad enough to make you come out here.”

“Fine. He said I should be careful with you. That you mean to do me harm. But that's crazy, right?”

I take her into my arms. Fortunately, she doesn't object. “That *is* crazy. I would never harm you.” A blatant lie. I want to hurt Katia's heart so badly. Call me an asshole or a psychopath, but I enjoy hurting people. It's just in my nature.

She eases into me. “That's what I thought. But that's the second time Mikhail has tried to warn me about you. Why would he say those things?”

“Because he thinks he's funny. Nothing more. Don't let it bother you. Why don't we go back inside and enjoy the party?”

“Will I have to dance with anybody else?”

“God, no. In fact, you can stay by my side all evening. I'll push anyone away who wants to dance with you.”

She laughs slightly. “I like the sound of that. Ok. Let's go.”

We go back inside, and I spot Mikhail trying to flirt with a woman—some daughter of one of my employees. “Why don’t you sit down?” I tell Katia. “I just need to speak to Mikhail really quick, and the rest of the evening will just be us.”

“All right.” She’s blissfully ignorant. Once Katia settles in at our table, I seek out Mikhail. “Outside. Now,” I order.

“Can’t you see we’re dancing here?” He nods at his date. The girl is pretty, if a little plain. Nothing like Katia.

“I can see that. I don’t care,” I grit out. “Now, move.” I start walking away, knowing Mikhail is following. Once we’re in the hallway, I turn around to face him. “What the fuck?”

“What?”

“You know what. You tried to warn Katia about me. Why?”

“Because I know your plan. You intend to use her. Hurt her.”

“And that bothers you?”

“No. I couldn’t care less about Katia, don’t worry. I’m not into her if that’s what concerns you. I just find it funny, getting under your skin,”

“That’s all?”

Mikhail shrugs. “That’s all.”

I take some deep breaths in and out. “You are so close to getting your face bashed in. Just leave Katia alone. You’re not going to mess this up for me.”

“Understood. Sorry, boss. I was just playing.”

“Well, don’t do it again.” I storm back inside and take my place at Katia’s side.

“Are you all right?” she asks. “You look a little ... angry.”

Calm down, I remind myself. Be her prince charming. Only a few more hours to go.

I smile at her. “I’m fine. Just had a chat with Mikhail, but everything is good. Now, time to focus on you.”

For the rest of the evening, we dance together, laugh together, and just overall have a lot of fun. It's kind of nice, I'll admit. But this won't last forever.

And, in fact, it's time for us to go home.

The party continues as Katia and I leave the reception. I drive us back to my house—now, officially, Katia's house, too. She wrings her hands together the entire ride back home. She knows what's awaiting. Us finally having sex.

Except, this evening will not go quite how she wants it to.

As I lift her into my arms once we're by the doorway, Katia laughs. I carry her all the way up to my room—now her room, too. Then, I set her down and take a moment to look at her.

"You are beautiful," I tell her, giving her one last sweet kiss.

"Alek, I'm ready," she whispers. "I'm ready to be with you."

"I know you are." I pull back and walk to the door, shutting it behind me. I grab a key from my dresser and lock the door. It's loud in the quiet of the room. Now, I'm in charge of who can leave and get into this room.

"What are you doing?" she asks lightly.

I turn back to her, pocketing the key. "I have to say first that I'm not sorry. That's what you need to know about me. I'm never sorry for my actions."

She frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"You think our marriage will be a fairytale for you. But I have to tell you now, Katia, our marriage will not be easy on you. This is not a fairytale."

"What are you saying? Alek?" She still hasn't gotten it yet. Poor innocent lamb.

"I'm not your savior. I never was. I'm the man your father was trying to run from. I'm the man your father sold you to.

I'm your worst fucking nightmare, Katia, and you don't even know it yet."

Her eyes widen, and her breath comes out faster.

I smirk. "Well, I guess now you do."

CHAPTER 6

Katia

I can't make sense of what Alek is telling me right now.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, feeling my heart beat faster and my breath come out shaky. "You've done nothing but protect me. I don't understand."

He approaches me, and I think for a moment he's going to kiss me, but instead, he grabs my arms roughly and pulls me in closer. I don't even fight. I'm just so stunned. "What you need to understand, Katia, is that everything I've done so far has been a lie. The sweet gestures. The kind words. The gentle kisses. All of it, a lie."

"But ... but."

"I know it's a lot to take in. So, why don't you sit down?"

Something in the way he asks bothers me. "No," I tell him. "I don't want to sit down. I want answers. What you said about you and my dad ... That can't be right."

He smiles sadly. "But it is. I'm the man he wanted to run from. The one he didn't want to get his clutches on you. But look. You walked right into my trap, and now, you're completely mine."

No. This can't be. "Your trap?"

"The whole thing with your friend being killed and me saving you from the madman with a gun? That man, Yuri, works for me. It was a ploy to get you to trust me."

Oh my god. Oh my fucking god. I'm not one to cuss, but this moment feels appropriate. "But you've been nice to me. I

fell in love with you.” I’m grasping at straws.

“I don’t think you’re going to love me for long.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of what I’m going to do.”

My heart skips a beat, and my back and underarms get sweaty. “And what are you going to do?”

“Tie you up.” He says it so casually that I don’t understand at first. Then it dawns on me. Everything Alek is telling me right now. I should be scared. I get that now. But it’s tough to wrap my brain around this man and the one I thought I’d married.

I try to take a step back, but Alek holds my arms too tightly. “Let me go.”

“No.” He picks me up before I can react and tosses me onto the bed. I shriek and scramble to get up. Maybe I can make it to the door. But then I remember that he locked it and has the key.

It’s a futile idea anyway because Alek hovers over me, pinning me down. I try bucking him off, but he doesn’t move. I’m not strong enough. He overpowers me so easily it’s scary.

I’m still going to fight, though.

I kick and scream but to no avail. Alek looks like he’s getting a kick out of this. A kick out of my fear. What kind of man is he? I knew things were moving too fast between us. I should have listened to my gut and gotten away from him when I had the chance. But I was mad at my dad, and Alek seemed so sweet. How naïve I was.

With one hand, Alek pins both my hands. He reaches over the side of the bed and comes back up with a rope. My fear ramps up. This is for real. He’s really going to tie me up. He really is a different man than I thought.

“No!” I scream. “No!”

“You can scream all you want. This room is soundproofed. Besides, Mila understands what’s happening here, so don’t

even bother trying to ask her for help.” He leans in closer. “You’re mine now, Katia.” Before, those words would have sounded romantic. Now, they chill me to the bone.

Letting go of one of my hands, Alek ties the rope around the wrist he’s holding before attaching it to the bed frame. I use my free hand to swipe at his cheek, but he jerks out of the way. He’s too fast. In an instant, he grabs my free hand and ties that one to the bedframe as well. He gets off me. I try kicking at him, but he grabs my legs. I watch in horror as he ties the rope around my feet and attaches it to the legs of the bed.

I try tugging on the rope, but it only digs into my skin. I stop moving. I could cut off my circulation if I’m not careful—that is, if Alek releases my arms ever again. If they’re too long held up like this, I could lose blood flow to my arms. That would be deadly. But surely Alek doesn’t want me seriously hurt? Does he? Why did he even marry me?

“Let me go,” I plead. My wedding dress, the dress I was so excited about when I bought it, the one I thought I’d have happy memories about forever, now feels suffocating around my body. It’s a symbol of the trap I fell into.

Alek steps back and observes me with a cold, detached expression. I’ve never seen him look like that before, and it fills me with dread. “I’m not letting you go, Katia. I told you. You’re mine now. Mine to toy, to play with. You’re going to be a lot of fun.”

“So, my fear is amusing to you?”

“Yes.”

I blink, startled by his bluntness. He’s not even trying to hide this new persona from me. “Was this who you were all along? Cold and mean?”

“I prefer to think of myself as ruthless, but yes. I’m not a good man, Katia. I pretended to be to get you to marry me. Look how easy that was. You really wanted to believe I was your savior.” He reaches a hand to my face, and I jerk away. His hand drops. “But I’m not.”

“Why are you doing this to me? You wanted me to marry you, and I have. I’ve done that. Why torture me?”

“It’s not torture, Katia. It’s fun.”

I stare at him in horror. “You’re a monster.”

He winks. “Now you’re getting it.” He paces around the room as he talks. “I’m a businessman. I’m the most powerful man in this city. I’m the ruler of the Bratva. The Russian mafia,” he explains when I look at him blankly. “Your father really did keep you in the dark, didn’t he?”

“I knew he was involved in shady things, but I didn’t know to what extent.”

“Now you know. You see, I’m not doing this to torture you. I’m doing this because I want you to truly be mine.”

“I married you!” I scream. “I’m yours. You don’t need to do this.”

He’s at my side in an instant, his face up against mine. I gasp and flinch, but there’s nowhere for me to move. “We’re married, yes. But you’re not fully mine yet. You won’t be until you’re broken and the only person you want is me.” He trails his fingers over my cheek. “I want you so dependent on me that you can’t imagine anything else in this entire world. Only then will you be truly mine.”

I can’t even respond. All I can do is stare at him in fear.

He steps back, giving me a chance to breathe. “You see, Katia. Right now, you’re too independent. A college-educated woman. You could go out into the world and get a job and support yourself. But I can’t have that. So, I need to break you down. This is just the first step.”

“My school,” I gasp out. “I’m not done with the semester. I won’t get my degree if you don’t let me out of here.”

“Did you not listen to what I just said? I can’t have you being independent. If you had your college degree, then that would be a problem. Without it ...” He shrugs. “Makes it a lot harder for you to leave me. And with no work experience, you won’t have anywhere else to go but back to me.”

“I have my dad.” Even though I’m still pissed at him, he’s a better option than Alek.

“Mmm. Your dad. No, see, he won’t get between us. If he does, I’ll kill him. Just like that.” He snaps his fingers. “So, if he knows what’s good for him and you, he won’t interfere.”

“No,” I whisper. “No.” Hot tears form at the corners of my eyes. I may be mad at my dad, but the thought of him dying fills me with sadness.

“Yes, yes,” he mocks. “Oh, poor little Katia. I know everything is difficult right now. But it’ll get easier. You just have to give in to me. I know you’re smart. So don’t think you can play me. I’ll be able to tell if you’re just faking it. I’ll know when you’re truly broken, and when that happens, I’ll let you go.”

“You’re going to keep me tied up forever?”

“No. This is just a part of it. I can’t very well have my wife tied to the bed all day long. You’ll be let out but under either my supervision or with a guard. You won’t have any freedom. You may think you can escape but let me get rid of those notions for you. You can’t escape me, Katia. So don’t even think about it.”

I calm down slightly, knowing I won’t be tied to this bed forever. Despite what Alek said, I’ll find a way to escape. I have to.

“Now, I’m going to leave you in here for tonight. Think about how you want to do this.” He kisses me on the forehead, which feels condescending, like he’s treating me like a child.

“It’s our wedding night,” I say quickly, formulating a plan. “We could—”

He puts a finger over my lips, silencing me. “Let me stop you right there. I’m not going to untie you so we can have sex so you can try to escape. We’ll have sex eventually, but I want you to beg me to fuck you. I don’t want a fake version of you. I want you to be so broken down and in love with me that you can’t wait a minute longer without my touch.”

“Fake version of me?” I say around his finger. He removes it. “That’s ironic, considering you’ve been faking it ever since we met.”

His lips twitch. “Get all this fight out of you now. I’ll enjoy seeing you break. Now, have a good night, my wife.” He unlocks the door and leaves, shutting it behind him. The lock turns again, keeping me in here, all alone. Even if I could escape my binds, I couldn’t get past the door.

I don’t try struggling since I know the rope will only dig in tighter, so I take this time to look around the room. I’ve never been inside Alek’s room before. It’s interesting that he’d tie me up here and not in the guest room I’ve been using. I guess it’s part of his master plan to make me obsessed and dependent on him.

Alek’s room is surprisingly warm in decoration. Rich dark green walls. Dark wooden floors. The bed I’m on is decked out with soft white sheets that give a nice lightness to the room. Everything blends. He may be a monster, but he’s a monster with good interior fashion choices. Well, with all his money, he can pay for someone to design every inch of his house. His clothing, too, is probably meticulously picked out by a stylist. A man like him has to put his best foot forward all the time. In fact, I’ve never seen Alek in anything other than a suit. He looks phenomenal in one. Even though he played me, he did show me bits of the real him. Like how he never got comfortable enough to wear something other than a suit around me. He never showed me vulnerability. Even our conversations were fairly surface-level. I know nothing of his parents or childhood.

I’m humiliated by the fact that I married a man I don’t even know. I didn’t even find out his last name until today—the day of our wedding ceremony.

Aleksander Antonov. That’s his full name.

I was so caught up in the excitement and fantasy of today that I never considered how little I knew him. I always had a good head on my shoulders. Yet, somehow, Alek put a spell on me that made me look past all my instincts telling me to run. I

fell for him because he saved me from Jeremy's killer. Yuri, Alek said his name was. It was a ploy. Yuri works for Alek. Alek was waiting for me to run into his arms so he could save me. No wonder he ran up to Yuri and knocked him out with so much confidence—he was never in any danger. That also explains why the police never found Yuri. Alek probably made sure he wouldn't get caught. He did tell me he was a powerful man. I'm just now beginning to understand the full extent of it.

I lie awake for hours until I fall asleep, and I'm amazed I even can manage that, but I need to keep my strength up if I'm going to face Alek again. I need to get the upper hand on him somehow. I'll keep trying until I do.

I WAKE up to something touching my leg. As my eyes slide open, I see Alek. He's standing over my bed, tracing his fingers up and down my shin. It's unsettling. I'm desperate to go back in time to when I desired his touch. Now all I can think of is how cold his touch feels.

“Good morning. I think it's time to give those arms a break. But if you try anything, I'll keep you tied to this bed for a longer.” After he frees my hands, I quickly bring them to my chest and rub my wrists. Astonishingly, he unties my feet, too, and I pull my legs up to my chest, wrapping my arms around my knees in a little ball.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

I glare at him.

“I'll take that as a no.” His eyes rake over me. “Did I mention before just how beautiful you look in your wedding dress?”

“I just assumed all your compliments were fake as well.”

“Not at all, Katia. That was the one part I never lied about.” He trails his fingers over my cheek. “You really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.” He takes his hand

away, and instantly, I miss his nice touch. I push that feeling aside. I never want him to touch me again.

“Now,” he says. “I thought I’d relieve you of your wedding dress. Get you into something more comfortable. What do you say?”

“Is this another trick?”

“Do you want out of your dress or not?”

Its fabric is uncomfortable after spending the night in it, and I’d love to put on comfier clothes. I stand up slowly, stitching my achy limbs.

I stand still as Alek approaches me. “Let’s get this off you, shall we?” he says as his fingers graze my collarbone. It sends shivers over me. He smirks like he knows the effect he has on me.

The last thing I want is for Alek to see me in my lingerie, but I doubt I have any choice in the matter. I hold my breath as he walks behind me, trailing his fingers from my collarbone over my shoulder and to the back of my neck. Goosebumps break out on my skin.

I let out a rough breath as he unbuttons my dress. The feel of his fingers on my bare skin tickles me. He slides the dress off until it pools around my feet. At least I’m still wearing my bra and underwear.

But that comfort is dashed when I feel Alek unclip my bra. Quickly, I press it against my breasts, keeping it in place.

“Katia,” he says in a warning tone. His breath tickles the back of my neck. “Drop it.”

“What will you do to me if I don’t?”

“Do you want to find out?”

God, no.

I force my tension-filled arms to let go of my bra. It drops to the ground without a sound, and I move my hair, covering my breasts.

I gasp when Alek reaches around my body and cups my breasts in each of his hands. Though I hate to admit it, it feels good. Which makes me feel even more ashamed.

He takes a moment to hold my breasts before letting go. “Now, what about your panties?”

“What about them?” I whisper.

“Do you think you should be wearing them?”

“Yes, I do.”

He leans closer and whispers, “Well, I don’t.” In a quick gesture, he rips my panties down. They pool around my feet onto my dress, and I cover my pubic mound with my hands.

“Now, lay on the bed,” he orders.

I look at him over my shoulder. “What? What about clothes?”

“I said I wanted you in something comfier. What’s more comfortable than being naked? I never mentioned clothes.”

Damn him. He *did* trick me again.

“Please don’t,” I whimper.

“Just lay down, Katia.”

I force my body onto the bed. There’s no use in trying to run. I’d have to get the key from him, and I seriously doubt I’m capable of that.

I keep my legs pressed together and my arms over my breasts. It’s clear Alek doesn’t like that when he grabs my arms and pushes them over my head, tying my hands to the bed again.

“Please. Please, don’t,” I beg.

Alek is quiet as he grabs my legs and opens them wide, pushing my knees up, so they’re against my stomach. Then he ties the rope around my feet in this new position. He can see the entire area between my legs. My most vulnerable area.

“Please,” I cry out. “Don’t hurt me.”

“Be quiet,” he snaps. “I told you before. I want you to beg me to fuck you. I just wanted to see all of you.” His eyes rake over my lower body. “Shame. You have hair down there. That’ll make it difficult for when I fuck you with my mouth.”

I gasp. He’s never spoken to me like this. “You’re going ... to put your mouth on me?”

He smirks. “Not today. That’s another thing I want you to beg me for. No. It’s clear what I need to do today.”

“What?” I whisper.

“I need to shave your pussy.”

I almost cough at his statement, then watch as he walks out of the room, locking the door behind him. A few minutes later, he returns with a razor, shaving cream, a bowl of water, and a towel. He really is going to shave me down there.

My legs tense as Alek sits down on the bed between my legs, and I loudly gasp as his hand touches my stomach, his fingers pulling my skin taut. He catches my eye. “Don’t move. I don’t want to cut you.”

Then he begins to shave my pubic mound. The only sounds are the razor hitting the bowl and the shaving cream coming out of the bottle as he puts it on my skin. He smears it around. His fingers are so close to my folds. It’s intimidating.

Once he finishes with my pubic mound, he turns his attention to the hair around my labia. My stomach contracts when his fingers brush my folds. He doesn’t try touching my entrance, for which I’m grateful.

Every time he touches me, I want to jump out of my skin.

Eventually, he finishes. I hope he’ll leave me be, but he doesn’t. Instead, he looks at my intimate area, now devoid of hair. Just another way to make me feel vulnerable and unprotected. My hair down there was like a shield, and now, it’s gone.

Alek swipes his finger up my slit, making me gasp. It feels ... good. God, why does it feel good? It shouldn’t.

He doesn't touch me again. Instead, he turns away and picks up the shaving supplies. "I'm going to leave you like that for now. I'll be back in a few hours."

As he leaves me alone again, in a locked room, tied to a bed, completely hairless in my most intimate area, all I can do is cry.

CHAPTER 7

Katia

As I turn to anger, my tears subside. How dare Alek do this to me? I'm a human, and I have rights. I don't deserve to be tied up to a bed, locked in a room, and married to a man intent on breaking me. In his own words, Alek wants to break me down until I become a shell of myself. I'll have to make sure that doesn't happen. But I can see how a person could break if they're tortured for long enough. And that genuinely terrifies me. Who will I be after a few weeks, a few months, a few years of this? Alek doesn't seem like he wants to let me go. He wants me to be completely his. No one goes to all this effort just to let their prisoner go within a few days.

No, this is just the beginning. I can't even fathom how long this will go on. Which pisses me off even more.

A tightness in my chest forms and makes it tough for me to breathe properly. I start to scream, knowing it's futile but needing to get out some of this emotion. I scream so hard and for so long that my throat becomes raw and scratchy. Great. Just another way to hurt.

My wrists and ankles ache from the rope. Alek tied it tight, and there's no way I can escape.

I shiver in the coolness of the room. My naked body doesn't offer me any relief. It just makes me more aware of how not in control I am. Alek is the powerful one here, and he's making sure I know it.

Thankfully, there's a clock on the wall, so I can pay attention to the time passing. It helps to keep me from going totally insane.

After three hours, I really have to pee. It doesn't help that I was tied up for hours before he shaved me. I haven't peed in over seven hours, at the least. If Alek doesn't return soon, I'll have no choice but to wet the bed. Will he be angry with me if I do that? Will he find it amusing? I'm not sure which one is worse.

I wait another half hour, but then I can't hold it anymore. I release my bladder and wet myself. A moan escapes my lips from the relief until humiliation settles over me. He made me wet the bed. The last time I did that I was probably four years old. Alek is trying to break me down bit by bit. It won't work. It's tough not to feel embarrassed and grossed out when pee covers the underside of my lower body. I can feel it down there, all wet. I shudder.

The hot sting of tears hits me again. I just want to be home with my books. I'm going stir-crazy not having something to do. Alek will bore me into submission.

The door opens, and I force myself to stop crying. Alek walks inside, his eyes assessing me and settling on my lower body, where my legs are still pushed up to my chest. He can see all of me down there. Every detail of my most intimate parts. He can also see that I peed myself.

"Someone had to go to the bathroom, it seems," he murmurs, resting his hand on my knee. "A dirty girl you are."

I flush. "I only peed myself because you've kept me tied up for hours. This is your fault."

"Blaming me won't get you far, Katia. Just something to keep in mind." He strokes his hand over my knee. It feels nice, I'll admit, but I still try to jerk my knee away. He doesn't get the right to touch me. And yet, that doesn't stop him.

He grabs my knee more forcefully and squeezes until it hurts. I wince.

“Be a good girl for me, won’t you?” He runs his hand up to my thigh. “Stay still, and I’ll make this feel good.” I gasp as his hand touches my stomach. Goosebumps break out on my skin. Alek rakes his eyes over my body as he moves his hand higher and cups one of my breasts, using his thumb to brush over my nipple. “Someone looks excited.” I blush harder—my face feels like it’s on fire.

As Alek rubs my breast, a sudden throb enters my core. Damn it. This shouldn’t feel good.

Alek finally continues his trail upward and rests his fingers over the pulse on my neck. “Your heartbeat is out of control,” he says.

I glare at him.

Alek smirks as he trails his fingers higher up to my lips. I clamp my lips shut, but he grips my jaw with his other hand and forces me to open my mouth. He slips his index finger inside. “Don’t bite. Suck.”

What would happen if I bit him? I’m scared to find out, but I can’t remain like this forever. I need to show him that I’m not a little doll for him to play with.

I wrap my lips around his finger and suck on it ... before quickly biting down.

Alek removes his finger, wincing slightly. The tiniest bite mark is left behind, but no blood, which is disappointing.

“You’re sassy this morning.” He grips my jaw and lowers his head. “I don’t like that.” He roughly kisses me. It’s so sudden that all I can do is freeze. Alek pulls back and releases my jaw by pushing my face away. “You’re mine, Katia. I’m going to break you. I’m going to leave you again for a few more hours. Think about what you’ve done.”

“Wait, please. I’m hungry. I haven’t eaten since last night.”

His cold look makes me feel so alone. “Then you should have thought about that before you bit my finger.” He leaves the room.

I slump back against the bed, drained.

ALEK FINALLY RETURNS two hours later, and my stomach has been growling for the past hour. It hurts how hungry I am.

He comes in with a tray of food with a lid on it, which he sets down on the small table in the corner. As always, he locks the door.

Fortunately, he unties my binds, and I rub my sore wrists and ankles. Then he picks up a towel from the tray and hands it to me. “You can clean yourself. Now, time to eat,” he says, sitting down at the table. There’s only one chair, and he’s in it. I stand up and want to stretch desperately, but I don’t want Alek to think I’m showing my body off to him. I’ve always been a pretty active person, doing yoga every day and walking everywhere. Being tied to a bed for hours is already taking a toll on my body.

I wipe down my backside, feeling slightly better, not being covered in urine. “Can I wear clothes?”

“No. Now, sit down. Eat.”

I grab the tray and try to walk to the bed, but Alek grabs my wrist. “No. You’ll sit down here. Eat at the table like a big girl.”

I scowl. “But there’s only one chair.”

He motions to his lap. Figures. I set the tray down and approach him, hesitating for a moment. Alek watches me intently, gauging what I’ll do. I have to play along—long enough until he trusts me, and I can try and make an escape.

I swallow my pride and sit down on his lap. More like the edge of his leg, but that’s clearly not good enough for Alek because he grabs my waist and pulls me flush against him. He rests his chin on my shoulder, and his breath tickles my skin.

He lifts the lid of the plate and reveals the food. “Eat, Katia. You did say you were hungry, didn’t you?” I’m filled with dread. The plate only has bacon on it. The thing is, I’ve

been a vegan for most of my life. Alek knows this. It was one of the things we talked about. He's testing me again.

"I can't eat this," I whisper. "I can't eat meat."

"Can't or won't?"

I gulp. "Won't. It'll make me sick. I haven't had meat in years. Besides, I can't ... do that to an animal."

"Fine. If you don't want it, I'll just throw it away. But then you won't get anything else to eat."

I look at him. "Are you going to starve me to death?"

"I'm hoping I won't have to." He pushes a piece of my hair behind my ear. My skin tingles at his touch. "You either eat the food I provide, or you can starve. But I'm guessing you'll break down and eat sooner rather than later."

"Is this another way to break me?"

He nuzzles my neck. "Yes." At least he's honest about it.

I push the plate away. "I can't eat it."

"Suit yourself." He grabs my hips and pushes me to stand before taking the plate and heading for the door. "There was something else I wanted to show you. Come on."

"You're ... letting me out?"

"Under my supervision."

"What about clothes? I can't walk around the house naked. What if Mila sees?"

His eyes rake over me. "I prefer you naked. Now, come on." He opens the door and waits for me.

I'm naked, I'm starving, and I stink of urine. But I'm desperate to get out of this room. So, I follow him out into the hallway. I could try running, but he'll just catch me. Plus, my hunger leaves me weak. He's right. I'll have to eat someday. He's making me sacrifice my ethics for him, and I hate him even more.

Alek takes me downstairs, and we pass Mila, who averts her eyes. I feel even more humiliated.

Alek doesn't even seem to notice her as he takes me to a closed door. "Enjoy." He opens the door to reveal ...

... a library. It's fairly large for the room, with wall-to-wall bookcases.

"You never told me this was here," I say.

"Because I was saving it for this moment. I know how much you like to read. Enjoy."

I rush inside and grab the first book my eyes land on. I don't even care what it's about. I just need some form of entertainment.

But the minute I open the book, Alek plucks it from my hands.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He puts the book back on the shelf, grabs my arms, and makes me walk back into the hallway. Then he shuts the door behind him and locks it.

"I don't understand."

Alek turns to me. "I just wanted to show you that this was here, so you know what you're missing. You won't get the chance to read any of these books."

My lips part in outrage. "You're being cruel."

"Did you expect anything else?" He looks so amused that I want to slap him.

So, I do just that. But before my hand can connect with his face, he grabs my wrist and stops me.

"I'd be careful about doing that," he says darkly.

I gulp as my heartbeat picks up. I can't stand this. First, he took my bodily autonomy, then my ethics, and now something that brings me joy.

I can't stay here.

So, I act on instinct. I run.

I run so fast toward the front door. It's just a few feet away. If I can get outside, I can ask for help and escape Alek once

and for all.

But I only make it a few steps before Alek wraps his arms around my waist and hoists me up.

“Let me go!” I try kicking and scratching him but to no avail. He’s just too strong. Much stronger than me.

Alek carries me back to his room, where he throws me to the ground. I land hard, crying out. “Did you really think you could escape me?” He picks me up and pushes me face down on the bed. “I own you, Katia. That’s something you better learn fast, or things will be much worse for you.”

Then he does something that shocks me.

He spanks me.

I gasp at the sensation. It burns and tingles. Alek spanks me again and again, each time with more ferocity.

“I.” Spank. “Own.” Spank. “You.” He continues his onslaught on my backside. I cry out harder each time his hand lands on my ass and grip the sheets under me, desperate to get away. “Answer me. Do you understand?”

I cry harder.

“Answer me!” His spank hurts so much I can almost see stars.

“Yes,” I sob. “Yes. I understand.”

“Will you try and run like you just did?”

“No.” I bury my face into the sheets. My voice is muffled. “No, I won’t.”

Spank. Spank. Spank. Each one hurts more than the last.

Finally, he stops. My body slumps onto the mattress. I’m completely out of energy, and it hasn’t even been a full day since Alek began his torture. I’m not sure how I’ll survive.

I hiss when his fingers trail along my backside. “You look fucking sexy like this, you know. If you weren’t a virgin, I’d fuck you so hard right now.”

I press my face harder into the mattress.

“But also knowing you’re a virgin makes me so hard. You know that, Katia? You make me so fucking hard. Feel.” He grabs my hand and places it over his pants onto his erection. I try to rip my hand away, but he doesn’t let me. I’ve never felt a man’s erection. I don’t want to feel Alek’s. I don’t want to know that he desires me. It makes me feel all strange in a way I can’t explain.

Alek finally let’s go of my hand, and I curl into a ball on my side, trying to wrap myself up so small that he can’t get to me.

“You need to know something, Katia. If you try to run again, there will be consequences. Do you want to know what those consequences are?”

I shake as I begin to cry.

“I’m going to tell you anyway.” He softens his voice as he gently rubs the side of my head. “You know I own a lot of properties. But one I’ve never mentioned is a strip club. It’s a fully nude strip club, meaning my girls get naked while they dance for paying customers.”

“Why are you telling me this? I already know you’re an asshole.”

“Mmm. Still so sassy. I’ll have to work on that. The reason I’m telling you, Katia, is because if you try to run again, I’ll make you work in my club.”

I freeze. It takes me a second to say, “What?”

“You heard me,” His voice is still in that soft cadence, in direct opposition to his word. “You’ll be dancing for men. Getting naked in front of them. Some might even try to touch you.”

“But ... you told me you were jealous. Why would you be ok with that?”

“Because I’ll be there every step of the way. There’s no way I would let any other man look at you without my consent. Even though some might try to touch you, I’ll make sure everyone knows you’re mine. You’ll be dancing for *me*.”

“This is just another way to humiliate me.”

He pats my cheek gently. “You know me so well. Now, get some rest. You must be tired from your run since you haven’t eaten anything in a while.” Bastard. Now he’s rubbing it in my face. “I’ll leave you be.”

“You’re not going to tie me up?”

“I thought I’d give you a break from it, but now that you brought it up, I guess I’ll just have to tie you up again. I wouldn’t want to disappoint my lovely wife.”

“No, please don’t. At least give me new bed sheets. These are covered in urine.”

“You made that mess. You can lie in it.” He grabs my arms and hoists them up, tying my wrists to the bedpost. I squirm and wiggle, but he’s too strong. I can’t stop him, and it’s frustrating. After he quickly makes work of tying my feet, he stands back. “There. Now you look even more beautiful.”

My backside hurts as it presses into the mattress. Just one more way he’s hurting me. I’m spread out like a starfish with my legs down instead of pressed against me like before. However, I’m not sure if this position is better.

“I’ll be back with dinner in a few more hours. Maybe then you’ll have a change of heart about eating.” He smirks as he leaves the room.

All I can do is stare at the ceiling and wish for all of this to end.

CHAPTER 8

Katia

Alek makes good on his promise. He returns with dinner, a plate full of steak and broccoli. Instead of untying me, he pulls the small table and chair closer to the bed. He lifts a piece of broccoli and holds it out to my mouth.

I'm so hungry by now. I open my mouth begrudgingly to accept the broccoli. At least this way, I won't starve.

"I thought I'd be nice to you," he says, offering me another piece. "Besides, I want you to stay in shape. You need your vegetables for that."

I want to spit the broccoli in my mouth into his face, but I swallow it instead. I can't waste the non-animal food he's offering. I know what's going to come next. He'll want me to eat the steak. I'd rather starve.

Once all the broccoli is gone, he cuts a piece of steak and holds it to my mouth. I clamp my lips shut.

"Open up, Katia."

I shake my head, giving him my best glare.

"You can't survive on vegetables alone. You need protein."

I want to snap back that he could give me something with beans or tofu—some other form of protein, but I know it would be pointless. He's a smart man. These are things he knows. He's just trying to be an asshole.

"Come on." He presses the piece of meat to my lips, but I shut them more firmly. He sighs and pulls it away. "Fine, then."

We can try this again tomorrow. Have a good night's sleep.” He walks away, giving me a cold smile, then leaves me alone.

I can't stay like this forever. Tied to a bed, completely naked. I'll go crazy long before Alek breaks me down.

At least the broccoli satisfied the worst of my hunger cravings, but I need more food. I haven't eaten meat in years. I don't want to break, but I'm not sure how long I'll be able to hold out if Alek only gives me small portions of vegetables to survive. The amount of broccoli tonight was no bigger than a handful.

I need to escape. I'm *will* escape. I just need a plan.

An opportunity arises in the morning when Mila shows up with a fresh set of sheets. The ones I've been lying on still have my urine soaked into them. It doesn't escape my notice that she locks the door before slipping the key into her pocket.

Her face flushes when she sees me tied up, naked. I wish I were past feeling embarrassed, but I'm not. A searing humiliation enters my chest as Mila approaches.

“I'm here to change your sheets,” she says.

“Mila, please, untie me.”

“I will. I need to be able to change the sheets.” She unties my wrists, not making eye contact. Is she embarrassed *because* of me or *for* me?

I sit up once she's done and rub my wrists as she unties my feet.

“Ok. Stand up.”

I get up as fast as I can, giving her space to take off the old sheets and slip on the new ones. This is my only chance to escape. Alek isn't here. I could overpower Mila, even in my weakened state. She's older and not as strong and fast as me.

“Mila, I need to use the bathroom.” I nod toward the ensuite. “May I?”

She hesitates before nodding.

I rush into the bathroom and use the toilet. Thank god. I hated having to pee myself. Then I slip into a shower and rub my skin raw, trying to wash away Alek's touch. He hasn't tried to rape me yet, but I don't think it'll be long before he tries something with me again. He's already touched my breasts and shaved me between my legs. I scrub my skin harder.

Once I step out of the shower, I take a moment to think. I leave the water running in the shower. I need to surprise Mila, get the upper hand.

I tiptoe to the bathroom door and take in a quick breath. Here it goes.

I rip the door open and run right for Mila, who's standing in the room, waiting for me to finish. I barrel into her before she can react. I push her into the nightstand while clamping my hand over her mouth so she can't scream and alert Alek.

"They key," I hiss. "Give me the key."

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head no.

I don't want to hurt her, but she's part of the problem. She's refusing to let me go, too. I jam my hand into her stomach, making her double over as she gasps in pain. I use the opportunity to reach into her pocket and grab the key.

Mila wraps her hand around my wrist, trying to take the key back, but I can't let that happen. I need to escape. So, I kick her shin hard enough to make her fall to the ground.

"Stop!" she screams as I unlock the door. I don't wait. I just run.

Water drips behind me as I run through the hallway and down the stairs. I can see the front door. I'm so close.

Then footsteps behind me. I'm so close. Then hands on my waist. I'm still so close. And then I'm being pushed to the ground so hard that pain shoots up the side of my body. I groan as I look up.

Alek. He's seething, his chest rising and falling fast with his lips pursed in a scowl.

I'm in trouble.

“I told you not to run. You weren’t supposed to even try it. And yet the second I give you an ounce of freedom, you take off running.” He shakes his head. “I’m disappointed in you, Katia.”

“Just let me go,” I plead.

He bends down and places his hand on my hip. “You know I can’t do that.” Then he squeezes my skin. I cry out, curling my body into a ball to get away from him. It doesn’t work.

Alek scoops me up into his arms, bridal style. I try squirming my way out, but he digs his fingers into my skin harder, stopping me. We pass Mila on the way back to the bedroom. Her head is hung low like she’s ashamed I escaped.

Alek tosses me onto the bed, and I lay there, having used up a lot of my energy running downstairs. I don’t have any left.

“I told you what would happen if you tried to escape again,” he says, pacing the room. “I told you!”

I flinch.

He approaches me so fast I jerk away. His breath stirs my hair as he says, “It’s time to get you dressed. We’re going to the club.”

“Which club?” I whisper.

“The Pink Paradise. My strip club. It’s time for you to put on a show.”

I cry out as he jerks me up and nudges me toward the closet.

“Pick something out to wear,” he orders.

I look around the closet, realizing he has women’s clothes hanging up. None of the items are mine. He doesn’t want me to retain any piece of me.

“What did you do to my clothes?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I burned them. You don’t need them anymore. You’ll only wear clothes I pick from now on.”

I gasp, fighting the urge to cry. I really loved some of my pieces. Another way he's trying to control me. To hurt me.

Instead of crying, though, I square my shoulders and grab a dress. I notice only dresses and skirts with tops in the closet. No pants in sight. He wants easy access. He wants me to feel vulnerable.

The dress I choose is a simple blue number that shows off my legs and arms. At least it goes down to hover right over my knees, so I don't feel too naked.

Alek eyes me over when I step out. "Good pick. You look stunning in blue. Now, let's go."

"But my hair is still wet."

"It'll dry on the way." He grabs my hand and forces me to walk downstairs. "Don't even think about running again," he says once we're outside. He practically shoves me into his car before getting in. The doors lock, so I'm unable to get out.

Alek is quiet on the drive to the club. I can tell he's pissed, which terrifies me. What will he make me do once we're at the club? He mentioned before that I'd dance for him. That won't be too bad, right?

The Pink Paradise is fairly subdued on the outside, but the minute we step through the front doors, I'm amazed by the opulence within. It's not a seedy little strip club. No, this strip club screams elegance and class. It's the middle of the day, so no one else is here. My eyes land on the stage with a pole right in the middle. I've never been inside a strip club before. Knowing I might have to dance fills me with fear.

"Business doesn't open for another few hours," Alek tells me as we walk farther inside. "I thought I could show you what you'll wear tonight."

I trudge after him as he leads me down a hallway and into a changing room. There are rows upon rows of mirrors on the walls with seats and counters in front of them and makeup residue. Clothing hangs from a rack across the room—clothing being a generous word. The clothes are nothing more than bras and panties, just with different colors and patterns.

“You’re going to need to change,” he says, nodding toward the rack.

“Now?”

“Yes, now. I want to see you in one of the outfits.”

I wring my hands together. For some reason, this feels more embarrassing than when he saw me completely naked for the first time.

“Katia.” I jump. “Pick out an outfit. *Now.*”

I don’t have any other choice. At least this way, I’ll be in control of my outfit.

I turn to the clothes rack and parse through it. None of them seem desirable. I glance over my shoulder at Alek, who scowls deeper. Finally, I just grab a random outfit. It’s a simple light pink bra and panty set. Except the panties are a thong. I’ve never worn a thong.

Alek nods, looking pleased. “A good choice. When you dance for me tonight, all those men will see you looking so innocent. They’ll be jealous, knowing you’re only mine.”

“And they won’t touch me?”

“I’d rather cut their hands clean off than let them touch you.” He rests his hands on my hips. “You are mine only, Katia. Until the day I die.”

Maybe that’s what I need to do—find a way to kill Alek. If he were dead, I’d be free of him.

He stands back. “Now, get dressed.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

I sigh and slip my dress off. I still feel embarrassed as Alek rakes his eyes over my naked body. I hurriedly slip on the bra and thong. It’s a perfect fit. I glance at myself in a mirror and am taken aback. I’ve never really thought of myself as sexy, but in this getup, I sort of look sexy. I still feel mortified, though.

As Alek slips his fingers under the edge of my panties, I gasp. “You look so fucking sexy. I could eat you right up. And who knows? Maybe I’ll just have to take a bite of you tonight.” He presses me against the counter and hovers his lips over my ear. “Would you like that?” He snaps the edge of the thong against my skin. I gasp louder. “I think you would. I think there’s a dirty girl inside you just waiting to come out. And it will be all for me.” He roughly kisses my neck before stepping back.

I remain standing there, feeling disoriented.

“Now, I’ll be out there, getting some work done. You’ll remain in here until I tell you it’s time for you to dance. And don’t think about running again. You can’t get past me going through the front door. And if you go out the back door, you’ll set off the alarm. Besides, I have guards looking out for this place. It’s the same at all my properties. You wouldn’t make it far before one of my guards or I grabbed you.” I hadn’t seen any guards on the way in, but that didn’t mean they weren’t around.

Alek rakes his eyes over me once more. “Fuck,” he mutters before turning around and walking away.

I slump into one of the seats. I can’t believe this is happening. I’m in a stripper outfit, expected to dance on a stage in a few hours, all because my husband is insane.

There’s a rack of robes against one wall, and I grab one, slipping it on. At least this will offer me some comfort in the meantime.

A chatter of voices enters the hallway, making me sit up straighter. The door opens, and a group of women piles into the space. They all stop when they look at me. I feel like a three-headed giraffe at a zoo.

Finally, one of the women, a blonde woman with kind blue eyes, steps forward. “Hi. I’m Stacey. You must be the new girl.”

“Were you expecting a new girl?” I ask.

A couple of the girls giggle, making me blush. Stacey smiles warmly. “New girls are coming through here all the time. It’s nothing new for us. What’s your name?”

“Katia.”

“Pretty name. That’s Kitty.” She points at a petite brunette. “That’s Alison.” A tall blonde. “And that’s Lizzie.” A shorter, black-haired woman with a large bust.

“How long have you all worked here?”

Stacey takes a seat next to me while the other women scatter, getting changed and putting makeup on. “It’s different for each of us. For me, I’ve been working here for three years now.”

“Wow. What made you work here?”

She hesitates before leaning in close. “I owed some money to the boss, and he said I could pay off my debt by dancing here.”

The boss. “Do you mean Alek?”

She blinks. The other women glance over with shocked expressions.

“Did I say something wrong?” I ask.

Stacey nods. “None of us call him by his first name. He *hates* that.”

“He really does,” another voice says from the doorway. A curvy redhead walks into the room. Her red hair is darker than mine, more auburn, whereas mine is more copper. “I called him Alek once, and he spanked me for it before fucking me roughly.” She smiles indulgently. “Though I didn’t mind the last part.”

I gasp. Alek has slept with these women? Or, at least, Anya. The thought ... hurts in a way I didn’t expect. And yet, I guess I’m not surprised. He’s not a good man.

“That’s Anya,” Stacey explains as Anya takes a seat across from me.

“Another redhead,” Anya says. “Don’t even try to compete for my tips, new girl. You’re not going to win.”

“Oh, I don’t want to work here,” I say quickly.

Anya tosses her hair over her shoulder. “And yet, here you are.” She turns away and picks up a tube of foundation.

“I’m only here because my husband is making me.” Maybe these women would help me escape. It’s worth a shot.

Stacey gives me a sympathetic smile. “That sucks.”

“I’m here because I owe Alek money,” Anya says, applying blush to her face. She points her brush at me. “But seriously, don’t call him that to his face. Only *I* get that right.”

Kitty tosses a beauty blender at her. “You just said he spanked and fucked you hard for it. You don’t get the right.”

Anya looks at me. “I do, too. New girl, don’t step on my toes. Don’t get close to Alek. He’s mine.”

A strange possessiveness comes over me. I don’t want Alek. Not after how he’s treated me. Anya can have him. And yet ... I want this woman to know that *I’m* Alek’s wife, and she isn’t.

“Alek is my husband,” I blurt out.

The room goes silent.

CHAPTER 9

Anya is the first to make a sound. She begins to laugh so loud and for so long that the rest of the women join awkwardly. Anya wipes a tear away from her eye. “You’re funny, new girl.” Her laughter immediately stops. The rest of the women, except for Stacey, follow. Stacey continues to chuckle until Anya shoots her a look, silently telling her to be quiet. Stacey stops laughing.

Anya turns to me. “But if you ever joke about that again, I won’t hesitate to make your life here tough. I have that power, you know. Being Alek’s favorite and all.”

If Anya is telling the truth, that she’s Alek’s favorite, then that tells me a couple of things. One, he has a thing for redheads. And two, Anya and I are super different. How could he be interested in both of us? And why do I even care?

I want to escape Alek, not get jealous over whom he gives his attention.

“I’m not lying,” I say. “I really am Alek’s wife.”

Stacey’s eyes widen comically. “Really?”

I nod. “But that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. He’s ... nothing like the man I thought I married. He’s holding me hostage. I need help escaping.”

Anya snorts. “You really know how to sell it, new girl.” She begins doing her eye makeup.

I turn to Stacey. “I’m being serious. I need help.”

Stacey looks between the other women and me before saying, “If what you’re saying is true, then I’m sorry, hon. But Mr. Antonov has a tight hold over all of us. Some of us still need to pay off our debts. And we can’t risk losing this job. We can’t go against him. I’m sorry.” She squeezes my hand. I fight back the urge to cry. Even here, I don’t have any freedom, and it’s clear that neither do these women. That’s how powerful my husband is—his reach extends well beyond me.

“She’s not telling the truth, Stace,” Anya says. “She’s just an attention whore.”

“And what does that make you?” I snap back. I’ve never been one to snap at people, but I haven’t been myself lately, not with how Alek has been treating me.

Anya pauses. The other women quiet down. Kitty and Alison exchange a look but keep their heads down. Anya turns to me, her mascara wand in her hand. “What did you say to me, new girl?”

I sit up straighter. “Why are you so rude? I’m not lying. You can ask Alek yourself, and he’ll tell you.”

Anya looks me up and down before smiling. “I think I’ll do that. In fact, I’ll ask him when I dance for him later this evening. When I get naked for him. He always likes to go fuck in one of the private rooms after I’ve done my dance.”

My blood goes cold. “We have to get naked?” I ask Stacey.

She nods. “That’s the name of the game here.”

“If you’re Alek’s wife,” Anya cuts back in, “then why are you here? That doesn’t make sense.”

“As I said, he’s a monster. He’s forcing me to do this.” I hug my robe tighter against myself.

Anya barks a laugh. “If I were Alek’s wife, it would get me out of this place. I’d never have to dance and get naked for random men again. He’d bathe me in riches. That’s why you’re not his wife. You’re back here with us bitches.”

I decide to ignore Anya before I get an aneurysm from how annoying she is. “I’ve never done this before,” I tell Stacey.

“It’s not rocket science, hon. You can watch the other girls dance tonight to get a feel for it before you go on. You do know when you’re going on tonight, don’t you?”

I shake my head.

Stacey pats my hand. “You poor thing. Thrown to the wolves. Well, as I said. You can watch us dance tonight. Hopefully, that will help. Now, I really need to do my makeup.” She turns away. That’s my cue to stop asking questions.

I keep to myself for the rest of the afternoon. My body is so tense and stressed from what I’ll have to do tonight. I’m not sure I’ll be able to dance past the stiffness in my body, though I’m sure Alek will make me. He seemed intent on showing me off. I don’t know how to take that.

The rest of the girls get ready for the show, changing into skimpy outfits like mine. I’ve never tried to compare myself to other women—it just goes nowhere and makes you feel bad. But I can’t help but notice how Anya fills out her bra better than I do. Her body looks ready-made to dance. I felt sexy in my outfit for a second, but now I feel like a child playing dress-up. All I want is out of this. Hopefully, once tonight is over, Alek never makes me come back here again.

Noise from the club filters into our room. Patrons must be arriving. The time is getting closer.

“I’m first up,” Stacey says, looking cute in a little white outfit. “The men love the innocent look.” She winks, then saunters out of the room. The rest of the women follow.

“Do I have to come, too?” I ask.

Kitty gives me a pitying look. “If you know what’s good for you, yes.”

I stand up and slip off my robe. The high heels I’m expected to wear are already hurting my feet, and I’ve only just stood up.

I follow the women out of the room and into the main club. After an announcement introduces Stacey, she appears on stage. The men whistle and holler as she begins to dance. The other women approach the men in the audience. It's intimidating, and I keep to a dark corner, hoping no one sees me.

The women grab drink orders and begin delivering them around the room. Men try to grab their butts and breasts. Some, like Kitty, let them. Some, like Anya, laugh and swat them away. That can't happen to me. It can't.

My heart is beating so fast it hurts. I might just have a panic attack and die right here in this very spot. I wonder what Alek would think of me then.

I watch Stacey dance from my dark corner. She's really good. Her moves are effortless and elegant, though much raunchier than I've ever seen. Her hands trace over her breasts and between her legs. The men especially love it when she touches her body. Every time she does it, they holler even louder.

I gasp when Stacey takes her bra off and tosses it to a man in the audience. Is that what I'll have to do? I'm not sure I'll be able.

Stacey doesn't seem nervous at all. In fact, she's a natural. She gets down on her hands and knees, and the men clearly love that position. Their lust-filled faces give it away. She slips her hands under the edge of her thong before taking it off completely. Now, she's fully naked on stage.

My eyes wander around the room. It doesn't seem right to stare at Stacey like this. I would hate it if people looked at me while I was naked. Though it seems my fears might become a reality tonight.

I spot Alek in the front row, sitting casually and relaxed in his chair. He's talking to a man beside him, not even bothering to watch the show. I recognize the man he's talking to—it's Mikhail.

I'm disappointed in my husband. He could at least watch the effort Stacey is putting into to dance for the crowd of men. But once Stacey finishes her dance, Alek turns to her and slips her a bill. At least he paid her for her time.

Though I hate the sight of Alek paying another woman for sexual services.

The next woman up on stage is Anya. Great.

The men go wild when she steps into the spotlight. Even Alek decides to start paying attention. Why does that make me feel like my heart is burning? Yes, Alek is my husband, but I hate him. I shouldn't care who he gives his attention to. I most definitely shouldn't.

Anya is great at putting on a show. She knows when to pose, when to move gracefully, when to act innocent, and when to act naughty. It's no wonder the men love her. Alek doesn't take his eyes off her. Bastard. If he's going to hold me hostage, he could at least give me the courtesy of not checking out other women. Especially redheads.

Anya faces Alek head-on when she takes off her bra. She tosses it to him, and it lands in his lap. He doesn't even bother to remove it. Then she takes off her panties and tosses those to him as well. Alek just looks at her more intently.

My panic is swelling. I might pass out. No, I think I am going to pass out. I place my hand on the wall for support.

Anya lays down on her back and spreads her legs wide for Alek, giving me a good look at her vulva. She's hairless down there, too. I wonder if Alek shaved her as he did me.

No, I can't watch this.

I stumble forward, feeling like I might throw up. A man with a toupee and glasses bumps into me, steadying my elbow. "Woah. You ok there?" He eyes me up and down. "Why, aren't you sexy? I haven't seen you around here before. Come give me a dance." He tries tugging me toward a seat, but I refuse.

"Let me go," I mutter.

"Come on, baby. Give me a dance."

“No!” I shout, tugging my arm back. In the momentum, I fall back onto my butt. Stupid high heels.

Alek looks in my direction and stands up, an angry expression on his face. He approaches the man. “Are you troubling her?”

The man gulps and shakes his head. “No. Nope. I was just off to get a drink.”

Alek smiles tensely. “You do that.”

He hurries away.

Alek turns to me and helps me up. “Did that man have his hands on you?”

“No.” A lie, I know, but I don’t want another person to be killed in front of me.

Anya stops dancing and watches Alek and me with a furious expression.

Alek scans me. “Weren’t you supposed to stay in the back room until it was time for you to perform?”

“All the women came out. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do, and you never told me when I was performing.”

“All right, then. I’ll give you a free pass. *This* time. But since you’re out here, why don’t you sit on my lap.” He tugs me forward, making it clear I don’t have a say in the matter.

Alek takes his seat and pulls me onto his lap.

“Am I supposed to move?” I whisper.

“No. You can just sit here for now. Let all these other men admire the beautiful woman who’s all mine.” He pulls me toward him, so my back is flush with his chest. Then he begins playing with my thong again, just slipping his fingers under the edge. For some insane reason, it makes me feel warm.

Anya looks pissed, and I can’t help but feel a little smug at proving her wrong.

“Your girl stopped dancing,” Mikhail says, leaning over to speak to Alek. He nods toward Anya.

“Anya isn’t my girl,” Alek says. It’s clear Anya hears him, and she looks even more pissed. “Katia is. And she’s right where I want her to be.” He moves his hand up to cup my breast. I gasp and remain still. “Isn’t that right, Katia? You’re my girl.”

I meet Alek’s gaze as Mikhail watches us with a curiosity that makes me uncomfortable. “I am,” I finally say, knowing this is what Alek wants to hear.

He smiles tightly. “I know you don’t mean that. Not yet, anyway. But soon, you’ll be craving me.” He nuzzles my neck. “Begging for me. Soon, you won’t know what to do without me.” He moves his hand down from my breast to cup me between my legs. The sensation makes my hips jerk up. I hate to admit it, but ... his touch isn’t unpleasant. In fact, it’s nice. More than nice.

I hold still anyway. I can’t let Alek gain any power over me. He can try to touch me all he wants. I’m not giving in.

Anya finishes her dance, even though she looks utterly annoyed. Once she’s off stage, Alek says it’s time for me to dance.

“But I’m not good,” I object.

“That doesn’t matter.” He helps me stand up. “Now, get up there and dance for me.”

I look around at the crowd of men, all looking back at me with lust. But it doesn’t make me feel sexy. It just makes me feel objectified.

I force myself to walk up the stairs to the stage and take my place there. Sultry music begins playing. I have to move. Alek might hurt me if I don’t give him what he wants.

I start swaying, unsure of myself. My eyes land on Anya, who’s walking through the crowd. She smirks at me like she knew I’d be bad at this.

For some reason, it lights a fire under me. I need to prove her wrong.

I begin to dance more, moving my body around. I feel silly, but judging by the men's looks, they seem to enjoy it. I get onto my hands and knees and arch my back. They holler and whistle.

Alek watches me with so much intensity that I stumble. His legs are open wide, and his posture is relaxed. The look he's giving me tells me he wants that bite of me he talked about before.

I stand back up and dance around the pole to the best of my abilities.

Then it comes time for me to get naked. I know the men expect it. I'm just not ready for it.

But I bring my shaky hands to the back of my bra and am about to unclip it when Alek stands up and motions me toward him. I hurry off the stage, relief coursing through me.

Alek grabs my hand and pulls me down a hallway, doors on either side. I can hear the sound of moans coming from within. He guides me into one of the rooms, and I see a bed and a side table with a bowl of condoms.

"Were you going to get naked?" he asks.

"I thought that's what you wanted."

"Only when *I* say, Katia." He grabs my arms and pulls me roughly against him. Before I can react, he kisses me with a passion he never has before. A soft moan escapes my lips. I don't want this, but it feels so good.

Before the kiss can really get going, Alek pulls back. "You are mine. Only mine. You are not to get naked on the stage unless I tell you. Understood?"

I nod, my entire body shaking.

"Good. Now, go change. I'm ready to take you home."

I follow him out of the room and into the hallway where Anya is waiting. Alek and I both stop.

“Anya,” Alek says.

“Is it true, then? You two are married?” she asks. There’s a nervousness in her voice.

“Yes,” Alek replies. “It’s not of any of your concern. Get back to work.” His voice is harsh. Anya flinches before composing herself.

“Fine. I’ll do that.” She gives me a quick glare before sauntering off.

“Women,” Alek mutters. “Katia, go change.” He leaves me standing there.

My eyes land on the emergency exit door at the end of the hall. This could be my chance. But no. I need to make sure there aren’t any guards out there. If I’m caught escaping, Alek will do something even worse to me. Like maybe take my virginity on that very stage in front of everyone. That would be a sight to behold. It would certainly humiliate me.

No, I can’t risk it.

I’m afraid of my husband, and there’s no way to escape. Not yet, anyway.

I hurry into the changing room and slip on my blue dress. It’s crazy how covered it makes me feel, even though my legs and arms are exposed.

I’m taking a moment to compose myself when there’s a knock on the door. If it were one of the girls, they would just come in.

I hope whoever is out there will go away, but no, my luck isn’t that good. The door opens, and a man pokes his head into the room.

It’s Mikhail.

I relax slightly, feeling a little better since I know him. But he also works for Alek. I can’t trust him.

“Katia? How are you?”

“Why do you care?”

He blinks, stunned by my response, before entering the room and shutting the door behind him. I don't like this. Not one bit. "I care because I don't like seeing an innocent woman get toyed with by Alek. You do remember I warned you about him?"

That's true. He did. Two times. Once at Alek's lounge and the other time at Alek's and my wedding.

"Why does that matter now? He has me trapped."

Mikhail's eyes gleam. "Not if you let me help you."

I pause. "What?"

"I can help you, Katia. I can help you escape Alek."

"Why would you help me? You work with Alek."

"Yes, but he's hurting you. I don't like that. Unlike him, I don't hurt women."

I inhale deeply. How can I know he's telling the truth? I can't, that's how. Alek is the devil I know. I hate him, but at least I sort of understand him. Mikhail, I know nothing about. It could just be another one of Alek's tests. If I agree to let Mikhail help me, Alek could punish me even more severely.

I just can't trust Mikhail's generous offer.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But I don't need your help."

Mikhail looks surprised. "Are you sure?"

Not at all.

I stand firm. I can't trust Mikhail until I get to know him better. I thought I knew Alek and look how he betrayed me.

"Yes, I am."

"All right. But I really must insist you let me help you. If you need it, here's my number." He extends a business card.

"I'm good." If Alek caught me with that, I'd be screwed.

Mikhail nods like he understands, which makes me feel more embarrassed. Everyone is pitying me. I wish they would all stop. "Well, if you insist." He slips his card back into his

pocket. "I'll leave you to your evening, then." With those words, he walks out of the room.

I stand there, wondering if I just made the biggest mistake of my life.

CHAPTER 10

Bringing Katia to the club and making her dance might have been a mistake. I loved seeing her look so scared and vulnerable, but I also hated how the other men looked at her. Like they were allowed to claim her with their eyes. I'm the only one who gets to claim her. Everyone else best remember that.

Still, I'm going to hold firm to my decision. Making her dance at the club is a good way to break her down.

I'm waiting for Katia to finish changing when Anya approaches me, carrying a tray with a glass of whiskey. My drink of choice.

"I didn't order this," I say, grabbing the drink and taking a sip.

Anya dips her eyes in a coy manner, but she's not fooling anyone. She's the least coy person on this earth. "I know. But I thought you'd appreciate it." She watches me as I nurse my drink. "How come you didn't mention you got married?"

"Did I not just tell you it was none of your concern?"

"It's just that you're having your own *wife* work here. I think that concerns all of us."

"No. It really doesn't. What I do with my wife is not for you to ask questions about or wonder about or care about. Now, get back to work, Anya. You have more drinks to serve and more men to please."

She leans in closer. “Does this mean you’re never going to fuck me again?”

I stare at her hard. “Anya. Work. Now.”

“Before I leave, I just think you should know your wife hates you. She mentioned wanting to leave and asked us for help. We turned her down, of course.”

She walks away, sashaying her hips. She goes up to one man and starts to give him a lap dance, throwing a pointed look over her shoulder at me. If Anya thinks I’m jealous, she has it wrong. She’s always been a favorite of mine, but she’s never been *mine*. And I’ve never wanted her to be. She was only ever a fun distraction.

Katia is the one I want. The one I want the world to know is mine and mine alone.

Anya’s words settle over me. Katia was trying to use the girls as a means to escape. That won’t do. That won’t do at all.

Speaking of my wife, she enters the main room and slowly approaches me. “Can we leave now?”

I set my empty glass down on Kitty’s tray as she passes. “Yes. I’m ready to get you alone.” I grab her hand and tug her out of the club. Katia follows obediently. She’s learning at least—she’ll never be able to escape me.

We make it back home, and I turn the car off once we’re in the garage. “Anya told me something interesting tonight.”

Katia tenses beside me. Interesting. “What did she say?”

“That you were asking the other girls to help you escape me. Now, what’s that all about?”

“It’s not true,” she blurts out.

“It’s not?”

“Anya has it out for me. She was going on and on about how she’s the only one with the right to call you by your name. She’s in love with you. She didn’t take too kindly to me being your wife. Anything she told you, I’d take with a grain of salt.”

I stare into Katia's beautiful face. She manages to look so innocent while she lies. Or is she lying? Anya does overstep her bounds a lot. I normally have a good bullshit detector, but at the moment, I'm not sure who to believe.

"Well," I finally say, "either way, I think I need to make sure you understand you're mine." Katia's eyes widen as I get out of the car and go around to open her door. She doesn't move, and I have to grab her hand and pull her out of the car. Then I scoop her up in my arms, limiting her chances of running.

Katia doesn't meet my eyes as I carry her upstairs to the bedroom. I like that I make her afraid. It helps her to take me more seriously.

I set her on the bed. "Lie back."

Without a word, she follows my direction. Her hands tangle in the sheets, and her red hair fans out around her head.

I grip the end of her dress and bunch it up around her waist.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"Showing you who you belong to." I rip her panties down and push her legs up to her chest. Katia whimpers and squeezes her eyes shut.

Then I touch her, really touch her, for the very first time.

I swipe my finger up her slit, making her gasp and her hips jerk up. It feels good knowing that even though she's fighting it, there's still some instinct in her telling her that my touch feels good.

I swirl my finger around her clit, wanting her to get wet for me. Katia turns her head away, unable to meet my gaze, and I smirk. When I press my finger hard onto her clit, Katia lets out a soft moan. Fuck.

Wetness begins to seep out of her pussy, coating my finger as I play with her. She likes this. She might say she hates me, but her body knows what's best for her. And what's best for her is me. I just need her mind to understand that.

In time, in time, I remind myself. Patience is a virtue—one I'm really good at.

Katia grips the sheets as I pleasure her clit, and I don't say a word as I look down at her and touch her.

She gasps when I cup her pussy, grinding my palm into her. Her legs begin to shake, but she still won't look at me. I think I know what will make her acknowledge me.

I press my index finger to her entrance and slip it inside. Her head whips around to look at me, her eyes wide. My smile turns darker as I begin to fuck her with my finger. She's so tight around my finger—I wonder what she'll feel like around my cock.

Katia looks away again, biting her lip. She doesn't want me to know she's enjoying this. But I know she is. I can tell by how her body responds to me. How her hips rise to match the pace of my hand. How her legs are tense. How she bites her lip, holding her voice back.

I fuck her harder with my finger. She won't get any sweet and loving touches from me. It's only raw and dirty.

Little gasps escape her lips as her hands clench together over her abdomen.

As my finger thrusts in and out of her, my thumb brushes over her clit.

Come on, come on, I think. *Come for me, baby. Come on.*

I thrust my finger deeper into her. My thumb presses into her clit. It's the final straw.

Katia moans as her body tenses and shudders. An orgasm washes over her. I know the signs. And I know she's not faking it. In fact, I can tell by the shame on her face that an orgasm by my hand was the last thing she wanted. It's real, her instinctual reaction to me. And it feels fucking good.

There you go, my good girl.

I take a moment to cup her pussy while her body calms down. Katia lets her legs fall open wide, unable to hold them up any longer. She's a vision like this. Looking flushed after

coming from my hand. I can't imagine how her body will react when I'm fucking her with my cock.

As I finally take my hand away, Katia watches as I slip my finger into my mouth, tasting her. She blushes. I use that same finger to brush a piece of her hair away from her face.

"Feel better?" I ask.

She looks away. "Do you?"

Still sassy, it seems. An orgasm couldn't cure her of it.

"I feel great," I respond. "I just fucked you with my finger and made you come. I'm on top of the world. Your body responded to me, Katia. You can't deny that."

"I hate you," she hisses.

"Mmm. You say that now. But in another few months, you'll be screaming out my name when I fuck you. Oh, because I'm going to fuck you so good when the time comes. Trust me on that." My eyes linger on her pussy. Fuck, her body is tempting. "Now, I think it's time for dinner. I'd like you to join me downstairs tonight."

I slap her pussy before she can get up.

She gasps. "What was that for?"

"Because I wanted to." I tug her panties back up and right her dress. "There. Now, let's go." I grab her hand and pull her behind me as we go downstairs. Mila is already finished with dinner—this time chicken with brussels sprouts.

I make Katia sit on my lap. As if I'm going to give her a chance to run again. Mila places a plate down for each of us, then leaves us alone.

"Eat," I say to Katia.

She picks up a fork and starts eating the brussels sprouts, as I knew she would. I take a moment to watch her. Once she's done eating those, I say, "Try the chicken."

She gives me a withering look. "You know I'm not going to."

“Fine. Then I’ll just have to make you.”

Her eyes widen. “You wouldn’t.”

I cut off a piece and place it against her lips. “Try me.” I grip her jaw so hard she has no choice but to open her lips. Then I shove the piece into her mouth. “Now, chew.” She glares at me as she does. “Now, swallow.” Except she doesn’t do as I say. She spits it out onto my face. I calmly wipe the meat away with a napkin.

“Now,” I say, “that wasn’t too kind of you, was it, Katia.”

“What’s not kind is you making me eat meat when you know it goes against what I believe in.”

“Too bad.” I grip her jaw and shove another piece in. This time, I hold her jaw, so she has no choice but to swallow. She fights it, but eventually, my strength wins out. A tear seeps down her cheek as she swallows. “There. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“You’re a monster.”

I chuckle. “So I’ve been told. That doesn’t upset me. I like being feared. Now, eat another piece.”

“No.”

“Well, if you don’t, I’ll force you again. And that was so fun the first time, wasn’t it?”

She’s fuming. I can tell by her narrowed gaze and shaky breath. But she eventually gives in, knowing she can’t win with me. She cuts up the tiniest piece and puts it into her mouth before swallowing. It’s pathetic, but it will have to do.

Katia tenses and drops her silverware, standing up suddenly. She runs to the sink and promptly throws up. I approach her, taking my time and watching as she vomits. I hold her hair back. I don’t want her pretty hair getting vomit in it.

If she’s going to throw up every time I make her eat meat, she’ll get sick fast. I want her broken down. I don’t want her physically unwell. I’ve made my point clear. I’ll be nice to her over the next few days and provide her with vegan meals. It’s

just another way to get her to trust me, so I can break her down even more.

Katia begins to cry as she throws up. Her voice comes out raw and scratchy. I feel a small amount of pity for her, but that's as far as it goes. She won't get any empathy from me. I'm not the type to feel love for others. Possessiveness, yes. Love? Never.

Once she finishes vomiting, Katia falls to her knees, hugging them close to her as she sobs.

I get a washcloth wet and lean down next to her. She watches me through her tears as I wipe at her mouth.

"You've never looked more beautiful," I murmur.

She just cries harder.

I finish wiping her mouth and sit back on my heels, watching her. Once she calms, I pick her up and carry her to bed, where I tie her up and leave her alone.

Just when I'm ready to ease into a night of reading, someone knocks on my front door.

I open the door, revealing Mikhail. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to know if you would reconsider Gabriel Rossi's offer."

I slam the door shut as he steps in. "Fuck, Mikhail. I told you no, already."

"But I went back to him with your response, and he said 'no' wasn't good enough. He was adamant about working with you."

"Well, I don't fucking care. I don't want to work with him. And I'm starting to tire of you bringing this up."

"Just think of the possibilities of expansion."

"Mikhail! Shut the fuck up. I have expanded my empire plenty. I do things on my own terms, not when others tell me to. You know this. You've been by my side for over ten years now."

“I just think we’ll miss out on earning a whole lot more money if we don’t take Rossi up on his offer.”

“I’ll decide things like that. Not you. And how dare you come to my house to lecture me about how we should be doing business. *I* decide that. Not you.” I rip open the door. “Now get the fuck out and stop talking to Rossi. I am not making a deal with him. End of story.”

“Fine. It was worth a shot.” He pauses in the doorframe. “How are things going with your wife?”

“Why?”

“Pretty bold of you to make her dance at the club.”

“Why does everyone think they get an opinion on my wife and me?”

Mikhail holds up his hands. “Not trying to overstep. Just curious, is all.”

“Goodnight, Mikhail.” I’m definitely not informing him of the goings-on between Katia and me. He’s already getting on my nerves with the whole Gabriel Rossi deal. Right now, he’s on thin ice.

“All right. All right. I’m going.” He saunters down the front steps. “Just consider expanding, is all.”

I slam the door shut in his face.

No one is going to tell me how to run my business. I’m Aleksander fucking Antonov. Everyone better fucking remember that.

CHAPTER 11

Katia

Another night of being tied to the bed. At least this time, Alek lets me keep my clothes on. It's not so daunting facing life as a captive when I'm wearing clothes.

I can't believe I actually ate meat tonight. It was so satisfying to spit it out into Alek's face. He can tie me to a bed, but he will never break me down. He will never make me change who I am.

Though I'm uncomfortable with how easy it was for him to give me an orgasm. I've experimented, but my own touch could never compare to Alek's. The orgasm he gave me was the most intense I've ever felt.

Which is why I feel so ashamed about it. I keep telling myself it was only instinct. My body responding to a nice touch. It has nothing to do with how I feel for Alek, which is only hate. I don't feel any lust for him.

Even if a dark flicker at the back of my mind says otherwise. And that scares me.

I can't give in to Alek. I can't let him break me down. I'm going to get through this. I'm going to find a way to escape.

I manage to fall asleep, despite how sore my throat feels from throwing up. The bad taste is still in my mouth when I wake up in the morning.

I jump when I see Alek sitting on the edge of my bed, watching me sleep.

"Scared?" he mocks.

“No.” My heart settles down and returns to its normal rhythm.

“Good. I brought you breakfast.” He unties me. “Sit down. Eat.” He stands, watching me.

Great. More meat, I’m sure. I trudge to the table, take a seat, and lift the cover. What I see surprises me.

No animal products whatsoever. Just a hearty-looking salad with beans and vegetables. Something I can actually eat in its entirety.

“What is this?” I ask Alek.

“It’s food. Now eat.”

I huff. “I mean, it’s a vegan meal. You’re not trying to trick me, are you?”

He crosses his arms while giving me a serious look. “No, I’m not. I just can’t have you throwing up all the time. I thought I would be nice and have Mila make you something you would like.”

You, nice? I want to snap back, but I keep my mouth shut. I need to take what’s given to me, and right now, it’s something good.

I immediately scarf down the food. I haven’t eaten a full meal in a couple of days, and it feels amazing.

Alek watches me with amusement, but I ignore him.

Once I’m done, I push my plate away and sit back. “That was good,” I admit.

“What do you say?”

I stare at him.

“Katia, I did something nice for you. What do you say?”

God, he’s so patronizing. “Thank you,” I mutter.

He places a hand behind his ear. “What was that?”

I sigh. “Thank you,” I enunciate.

“Better. Now, take a shower. You’re going back to the club today. I need you clean.”

I do as he instructs and head into the bathroom, but before I can close the door, Alek stops me.

“What?” I ask.

“You really thought I’d let you take a shower without me watching you?”

I step back. “Can’t I have some privacy?”

He chuckles darkly. “Not under my roof. Now, hop in.” He leans against the counter, looking smug.

I turn away from him and strip off my clothes. He’s already seen me naked, and yet, I still feel just as nervous as the first time. I quickly get into the shower and shut the door, letting the water wash over me. Fortunately, the glass steams up and helps hide me from Alek. I also keep my back to him the entire time.

I yelp when the door opens, and Alek gets into the shower with me. He’s completely naked. I’ve never seen this much of him before.

My eyes glance down to his length before quickly darting away. “What are you doing?”

“Can’t a husband take a shower with his wife?”

I remain quiet as I shampoo my hair.

Alek touches my hips, making me gasp. “I’m going to wash you. Make sure you’re good and clean.”

I hold still as he stands behind me, running his hands up my hips to my breasts. He kneads them for a moment before trailing his fingers down to my stomach. Goosebumps break out onto my skin.

And I hate to admit it, but that familiar throb enters my core. My body can’t help but respond to Alek’s touch, even though my mind is completely against it.

I hold my breath as he moves his fingers to my thighs and over my butt. His fingers reach around and gently brush my

pubic mound before moving away. He stops touching me completely. The sudden absence of his touch confused me, leaving me lonely.

I look back at him to see him washing his hair. He's not even looking at me.

After quickly washing my hair, I step out of the shower, and Alek follows suit. He's a sight to behold, standing naked before me in all his muscled glory, dripping wet. I hate that I love how he looks. Why does he have to be so handsome?

Alek grabs a towel and begins wiping me down. It doesn't escape my notice that he brushes the towel between my legs, which makes me gasp. Finally, he steps back. "There. All clean."

My eyes shoot down to his length, only to notice how it's grown. He's aroused. Because of me. I don't know what to make of that.

I look away, but not before I catch his smug grin. "Can I get dressed now?"

"You may."

I run out of the bathroom and into the closet, grabbing the first dress I see—a cute, white summer dress with a floral pattern.

Alek steps out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist. The sight of him is way too pleasing. I hate him.

"Meet me downstairs," he says before leaving the room.

Is this another test to see if I'll run? Knowing Alek, it is.

I walk downstairs and stand in the foyer until Alek shows up in his standard suit. I was eyeing the door but decided not to try and run. So far, it's only led to worse outcomes.

Alek takes me back to the club. It's the middle of the day, so it's dead quiet. When I enter the changing room, I find Anya already there. Alek remained back in the main room, so it's just us.

She scowls when she sees me. "You're back."

“Not by my choice.” I grab the same bra and pantie set I wore before off the rack.

“Still doesn’t make me like you.”

“I don’t really care, Anya.” I step behind a changing screen and get into the ensemble, throwing a robe on before stepping out. “I’m just here because Alek is making me. Being his wife isn’t glamorous. It’s my nightmare.”

Anya doesn’t respond.

It’s tense between us until the other women show up. Stacey takes a seat next to me, smiling brightly. “How are you?”

“Not doing too well.”

Stacey gives me a pitying smile. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you before, hon. I wanted to.”

I offer a smile in return. “I understand. You can’t risk your life for me. It was never fair of me to ask you in the first place.”

“I watched you dance yesterday. You were a real natural.”

I snort. “I doubt that. I felt so awkward in my skin.”

“Nah, you look good up there. Your hubby couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“That’s not exactly a consolation when my ‘hubby’ is the one making me do this.”

Stacey pats my knee. “I hear you. Ready for another long night of this?”

I stare at myself in the mirror. I look so different with the makeup and the sexy outfit. I don’t recognize myself. Alek is already trying to tear my sense of self away from me.

The girls and I leave the changing room when the club opens and patrons enter. I stay back as I did before and observe the other women at their jobs. They serve drinks, give lap dances, and dance on the stage, acting like it’s no big deal when it is. I’m sure many of them hide it, but then there are women like Anya who seem to really enjoy the attention.

I'm watching Kitty dance on stage when I see Anya from the corner of my eye. She's walking down the hallway toward the private rooms with a man who looks like Alek from behind. It can't be him, right? I look around the room, but I don't see him.

I follow Anya and the mystery man to see which room they go into. Then, with my heart beating so fast and my palms sweaty, I crack the door open an inch and peek inside. Anya is lying on her stomach, her butt in the air. The mystery man, whose face I still can't see, grabs Anya by the hips and begins having sex with her. It's rough and raw. I shouldn't be watching, yet I can't look away.

Anya moans like a porn star, and I can't tell if she really likes it or if she's just acting. The man's movements are fast and rough. It doesn't look pleasurable. In fact, it looks painful.

I don't know how to feel watching this take place. Will Alek force me to do this someday? I shudder at the thought.

Anya opens her eyes, and her gaze catches mine in a mirror that acts like a headboard for the bed. I gasp and step back. Anya smiles smugly and groans even louder.

I stumble away until my back hits the opposite wall. After a few minutes, the door opens wide, and Anya steps out. The mystery man follows. It's not Alek. It's ... Mikhail.

His eyes widen when he sees me. "Katia." He clears his throat before nodding once and then hurrying away.

Anya rolls her eyes as she approaches me. "Like what you saw?"

"Not really."

"Have you never been fucked before?" She trails her fingers over my upper chest, and I swat her hand away. "I was just asking."

"That's none of your business."

Anya smirks. "I'll take that as a no. Just sweet missionary for you, huh?"

I look away.

Anya gasps and then smiles like the cat who ate the canary. “Wait. Have you never had sex before? Is Alek’s precious wife somehow a virgin?”

I push past her. “Anya, just stop.”

“Fine. But I can’t wait until Alek fucks you bloody. Then you’ll be no different from us girls who work here. You’ll be a whore like us, too.”

I keep walking until I’m in the main room again. Still, no sign of Alek. Doesn’t mean he’s not around, watching me. Alek tends to do that.

I feel my panic rise. Between seeing Anya have sex with Mikhail while thinking he was Alek to being on my own in a strip club with men looking at me like I’m a piece of meat they can’t wait to devour, I feel like I might pass out.

I can feel my beating pulse in my head. Each pulse is a hard throb that hurts more and more. My breath gets caught in my throat as I lean against a wall. I can’t do this. I just want out of here.

A man approaches me. He’s slim with black hair, but he’s not ugly. He’s sort of cute.

“Would you like to join me alone?” He places his hand on my hips, and I try pushing them away, but I feel so weak. “Come on, baby.” He nudges me toward the hallway.

I stumble down it, feeling like I’m stuck in some sort of nightmare where reality and fiction blur together. Where’s Alek? And why do I care? I don’t need him, yet he’s the only one keeping me safe in a place like this.

The man opens one of the doors to a private room and ushers me inside. No. I need to get out. This can’t happen.

Finally, I snap out of my panic and run for the door, but the man grabs me around the waist and tosses me onto the bed. “Stop. Please.” I try pushing him off me, but he pins me down.

“Just be still, baby. I’ll make it good for you.” He leans down and licks his tongue up the side of my face. I whimper. No, this can’t be happening.

“Get off me,” I say, putting as much emphasis into my voice as I can muster. “Get off!”

The door bangs open, and Alek comes in. I only feel a second of relief as he pulls the man off me before he looks at me with so much anger and disgust in his eyes.

Alek turns to the man. “You don’t touch her. You hear me,” he says in a menacing growl.

The man looks scared out of his mind as he nods and runs out of the room.

Alek shuts the door behind him and turns to me.

“Alek,” I say, pushing myself up.

He holds up a hand. “I don’t want to hear it. Why were you in this room with a man who isn’t me?”

“He forced me in here. I didn’t want this. Please believe me.” As I plead, I begin to cry. I don’t want Alek to hurt, not any more than he already has.

Alek’s face is like stone, unmoving, uncaring. “I believe you,” he finally says.

I let out a laugh in relief.

“But I was told some other news tonight.”

I sit up straighter, not liking his tone of voice. “What?”

“I was told there was a rumor going around that you’ve been flirting with one of the men in this club.”

“What? Who told you that?”

“Anya.”

I blink before I huff. “Anya hates me. She made that up. I haven’t flirted with anybody.”

“No? So, you haven’t been alone with any man other than me?”

I hesitate. There was Mikhail when he came into the dressing room, talking about wanting to help me, but nothing else happened.

Alek's face somehow becomes even colder. "So, you have been alone with another man?"

"Yes, but—"

He turns to the door and rips it open before dragging in some man I've never seen and slamming the door behind him. The man is muscular with blond hair. "This is John, a frequent patron of this club. Anya told me she saw you flirting with him."

Ok, so not Mikhail. I already admitted to talking to another man alone. If I say it wasn't John, then Alek will ask who, but Mikhail may be my only chance to escape. I can't throw him under the bus. I have to come up with a lie.

"I didn't flirt," I tell Alek. "John only talked to me once, but I told him to leave me alone. I don't even want to be here. You're making me."

"So, you won't care if I kill him, then?"

John's eyes widen. "Don't!"

Alek whips out his gun and promptly shoots John in the head. I scream, jerking back, my hands pressed to my mouth. John's blood splatters on the wall behind him, so close to me.

Alek casually cleans his gun before sticking it back in his pocket.

"Why did you do that?" I whisper.

"Because I can't risk you flirting with other men."

"What about the man who just tried to rape me?"

"I could see the truth in your eyes that you didn't want him touching you. I only killed John because I can't risk you developing feelings for another man who isn't me."

I stare down at John's dead body. A flash of Jeremy's dead body enters my mind. It's a terrifying sight, and I have to look away.

Some poor man was killed because Anya started a rumor. And Alek was crazy enough to believe it. He's *that* possessive over me.

“I’m going to leave you here for an hour,” Alek says. “Think about your behavior. If you’re ever caught flirting with another man again, I’ll do worse than just kill him. You understand?”

I nod, unable to speak.

Alek walks away, leaving me alone in a private room at a strip club with a dead body.

FINALLY, the door opens, but it’s not Alek. It’s two men I don’t know. They don’t even look at me as they collect John’s body and carry him out of the room. I’m curled on the bed, too scared to move.

Alek appears after that and motions for me to come. I push myself up and follow him, stepping around John’s blood on the carpet. He takes me to the changing room. “Get dressed. We’re going home.” He then walks away.

I hurry into the changing room, shutting the door behind me. When I turn around, I almost scream. Anya is there, looking smug.

Instead of saying a word, I walk up to her and slap her across the face.

Anya gasps, clutching her cheek. “What the fuck, bitch?”

“You got an innocent man killed tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You told Alek I was flirting with some man named John when I wasn’t. You know I wasn’t.”

Anya shrugs. “Who knows what I know? A lot happens at a strip club. Anything is possible.”

“No. No. Because Alek killed him right before my eyes. So, if you’re so set on this vendetta against me, don’t throw innocent people into Alek’s path. He’s obsessed with me. He’ll hurt anyone in his way to have me.”

“Wow. You think highly of yourself.”

God, I could strangle her. But there's been too much death tonight, and I'm not a violent person. I won't let Alek or Anya turn me into something I despise.

“Listen, Anya. I am telling the truth. Alek killed a man tonight. All because of the rumor you made up. If you want to hurt me, then hurt me. Don't use other people to do it.”

“John wasn't innocent, new girl. I used him in the rumor because I wanted Alek to hurt him. It was just an added bonus that you were hurt, too.”

“What?”

“John was a sick fuck. He liked to hurt us girls. Not just the typical spanks. He liked to beat us up. But as long as he was a paying customer, Alek never got rid of him. This was a good opportunity to hurt some scumbag and you in the process. I didn't think he'd actually kill him, but good riddance. So, I wouldn't feel too bad for poor little John if I were you.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder before walking out of the room.

I stand there, stunned. Ok, so if what Anya says is true, then John was an asshole. That still doesn't make right what she did, especially using me in her schemes. I already have to deal with Alek trying to control me. I won't put up with Anya, too.

For some reason, Alek believes her. He takes her word over mine. He's known her longer, but *I'm* his wife. It's just another way for him to hurt me, but I'm not even sure if he's aware of this one.

The door opens, and Mikhail pokes his head in. I didn't even know he was still here. I can't look at him after seeing him have sex with Anya. I cross my arms over my chest, hyper-aware that I'm still in the bra and panty set.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I wanted to make sure you were ok. I heard about what Alek did tonight. If you want my help, Katia, I'm still offering.”

I hesitate. Before, I didn't take his offer up because I was afraid of what Alek would do if he found out. Well, I know what he'd do. He'd kill Mikhail. I can't risk Mikhail dying because he was trying to help me. It's not fair.

"I don't know," I finally say.

"Here." He hands me his card again. "Just take it. So, that way, you always have the option."

I stare at the card for a moment. So many conflicting thoughts coursing through me.

But then I look into Mikhail's eyes, and ... they seem nice. Safe. Maybe he really is telling the truth and wants to help me. Maybe I need the one thing I'm lacking - hope.

So, I take the card.

CHAPTER 12

Alek

I storm up to the bar, grab a bottle of whiskey, and pour myself a drink. It burns when I chug it back, but it also feels damn good.

I just killed one of my paying customers because of some rumor. It might not have even been true. I have always been a businessman, first and foremost. I don't lose my cool. I also don't kill one of my customers. If this gets out, then the strip club could go under. My other businesses could even be targeted.

I used a silencer on the gun, and the back rooms are soundproofed. Two of my employees, Zach and Leo, are the best of the best at cleaning up dead bodies, and they managed to get rid of John's body without any of the other customers knowing about it.

Even though the mess is cleaned up, I still feel shaken. I never get like this. Whenever I kill someone, it's calculated.

And it's most definitely not done in a crowded strip club.

I only feel myself relaxing once all the customers have gone and I can sit at the bar and drink.

Katia makes me feel more unhinged than I've ever felt. I just couldn't stand the idea that she'd flirt with anyone. It felt like a betrayal straight to my gut. I needed to handle that. It had to be handled. I just keep reminding myself. I didn't do an impulsive thing. Katia needed to be put in line and reminded of who she belongs to.

As for John, well, I couldn't risk if Anya was telling the truth or not. If he was flirting with my wife, and that just couldn't stand.

Mikhail approaches me. He's the only one left other than Katia and me. "You look ..."

"What?" I snap. "I look like what?"

"Crazed. I've never seen you act like that before."

"What? Passionate?"

"Impulsive."

I scowl and pour myself another drink, swallowing it in one gulp. After slamming the glass back down, I wipe my mouth. "Never call me that."

Mikhail holds up his hands. "Don't shoot the messenger. That's all I'm saying."

"It sounds like you're trying to say more."

"You've always been cold and ruthless but also very calculated. Killing one of our paying customers isn't a good look. In fact, it's a lot like how Gabriel Rossi would act."

I get right up into Mikhail's face. "*Never* compare me to that bastard. He's known as a crazed idiot. I am not that way." I sit back down and chug back another drink.

"Why don't you slow down." He takes the bottle away. "If you don't want anyone to think you're like Gabriel Rossi, then don't act like him. You need to get a grip. Ever since you married Katia, you've been more distracted. You get angrier faster. I've never seen this much emotion from you before."

"What of it?"

"I just don't know if it's a good thing or not."

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. "What I feel and how I act on those feelings is none of your concern, Mikhail. Just leave me be. I'm waiting for Katia to get dressed, and then I'm going back home."

“That’s for the best. You don’t want to accidentally kill more people along the way. Bad for business.”

I shoot him a glare. “You’re on thin ice right now. Stop trying to be funny and go.”

Mikhail looks at me for a few moments before heading toward the door. He stops, though, when Anya enters the main room. I didn’t know she was still here.

“Anya?” I ask.

“I can’t believe you killed that man, sir.”

My eyes are on Anya, so I don’t notice when Mikhail heads down the hallway toward the changing room. “You’re always sticking your nose into business that doesn’t concern you.”

She sidles up next to me. “That’s just how I am. But I think you like that about me.” She trails her fingers down my arm. “I think you like that a lot.”

I just stare at her.

“You know, sir, things between us don’t have to be over just because you’re married. I’m still down to fuck.”

“Anya.” I grab her hand and squeeze it. She winces. “You once caught my attention. I still think you’re beautiful.” She smiles at this. “But Katia is all I see now. Your advances don’t interest me any longer.”

Her smile promptly turns to a frown. “But, sir—”

I cut her off by grabbing her jaw and pinning her body against the counter. A look of fear enters her eyes. I lean close to say, “You’re just embarrassing yourself.”

Someone clears their throat, and I look over. It’s Mikhail. Of course, it fucking is.

I let Anya go, and she scampers out of the club. “What?” I say to Mikhail, who’s looking at me with disapproval. “I thought you left.”

“I just needed to grab something. You know, I like Anya. If you’re done with her, I wouldn’t mind a chance at her.”

“By all means. She’s yours.”

“Good. Because we already fucked.”

“I’m happy for you, Mikhail. Now get the fuck out of my club before I punch you. You’re fucking annoying me tonight.”

“You know, Katia saw me and Anya fucking. Just thought you should know that.” He whistles as he walks away. Once the door closes behind him, I finally get a little bit of peace and quiet.

So, my little Katia was spying, was she? I wonder why. She didn’t mention that to me before. Granted, I didn’t give her a chance to say much while killing John.

Katia finally leaves the changing room and stands in the middle of the room, not running away but not getting closer to me either. She’s a perfect vision in her white dress.

“You remind me of our wedding day,” I tell her. “What a day that was.”

“You sound like you speak of it fondly.”

“I do.”

She hugs her arms around her. “I don’t quite have the same happy memories as you do.”

“Why not? I gave you a good wedding, didn’t I?”

“The wedding was fine. It’s what happened after that left a bad taste in my mouth. You ruined that day for me when you tied me up.”

I approach her and rest my hands on her hips. “I don’t see it that way. I see it as the day you officially became mine.”

“I don’t want to be yours,” she whispers.

“Brave of you to say. Especially after I just killed someone for you.”

“You didn’t kill that man for me. You killed him for you.”

“Semantics.”

“You know, Anya told me the only reason she told you about John and me was that John was beating on the women, and she wanted him dealt with. You played right into her plan.”

An intense fury enters my chest. “She told you that?”

“She did. Just now in the changing room.”

My hands squeeze Katia’s waist harder. Anya fucking played me. Fuck. That is if Katia is telling the truth. It’s hard to know what’s going on between the two women. What I do know is that Anya is opportunistic and willing to get ahead while Katia is trying to save herself from me, meaning she’ll tell me anything to protect herself. It’s hard to know when one is lying and the other is telling the truth.

What I do know is that I’m fucking pissed. What I also know is that I fucking want Katia more than I want anything else in this world.

I grab her waist and hoist her up onto the bar. She gasps, gripping my shoulders. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“Just be quiet,” I snap. She flinches.

I shove the end of her dress up around her waist, then rip down her panties. I know the bar is clean because I make sure every part of the club is cleaned after the patrons leave.

“What are you doing?” Katia says, trying to push me away.

“Be quiet, Katia.” I push on her stomach until she leans back on her hand. Then I kneel before her and finally do what I’ve wanted to do since seeing her photo.

Taste every inch of her.

I put her legs over my shoulders and grip her thighs before I dive in, licking my way up her pussy. Katia gasps, her hips jerking up.

“Alek, what ...?”

I don’t respond. Instead, I just lick and kiss her all over. Between her folds, on her clit, over her entrance. Fuck, she’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted. A mixture of natural musk with

a sweetness that's undeniably sexy. It makes me even harder knowing she's still my innocent virgin. She only knows my touch and will only know it for the rest of her life.

I roll her clit around with my tongue. Katia lets out a soft moan, then quickly clamps her lips together. She doesn't want to enjoy this. I can feel the tension in her body as she fights it. But she won't win. I'm going to fuck her with my mouth so good she'll have no choice but to call out my name.

I growl as I lick her harder. Katia's legs tremble around my face, and a muffled moan escapes her as she presses a hand over her mouth.

Then I take things further.

I press my tongue against her entrance and enter her. Katia gasps so loud I'm sure someone walking by could hear. Good. Let anyone know Katia is mine and that she's only making these sounds for me.

I fuck her with my tongue as I use my finger to press onto her clit. The sounds escaping her are getting louder even though it's clear she's still trying to hold back.

Her hands slap down onto the bar as she curls her fingers around the edge. I look up and see the beautiful expanse of her neck as she drops her head back. Once I'm done fucking her with my mouth, I'm going to kiss that neck. I need to taste all of her.

I grip her thighs harder as I pull them apart wider and show her who she belongs to. The growl that escapes me reverberates into her skin. I pull my tongue out of her and place it back onto her bundle of nerves. I'll never get enough of Katia. She has a hold over me she isn't even aware of, and I'm going to make sure it stays that way. I can't have her thinking she has any power in this marriage.

When my lips flick over her clit, it's enough to send her over the edge.

Katia cries out as her orgasm washes over her, her legs trembling and her arms unable to hold her up any longer. She drops to her elbows while her legs go limp.

However, she didn't call out my name. She only let out a moan. Suffice it to say, that makes me even more fucking pissed. But I can't force it. I want Katia to call out my name of her accord. She will in time, I have no doubt. I just need to be patient.

I press kisses all over her pussy as her body relaxes. Then, keeping to my promise to kiss her neck, I stand and grip her chin, tilting her head back and pressing my lips to the sensitive skin of her neck. Katia lets out a sigh.

Then I step back and rake my eyes over her. She's a vision; all splayed out on my bar, her pussy on display for me and me only. Katia doesn't move as she returns my gaze. A hint of arousal is in her eyes, but also a hint of fear. She doesn't want to move because she's worried about how I'll react.

Knowing she fears me makes me feel more powerful. I want her to be submissive to me. I'll break the sass out of her sooner or later.

When I cup her pussy with my hand, Katia gasps and sits up straighter. "You're so fucking wet for me," I murmur.

"Who says it was for you?" she snaps back.

I grind my palm into her pussy, making her lips part and her back arch. "You like how I touch you. Admit it."

"No."

"Fine. You don't have to say it. I can already tell by how your body responds to my touch." I flick my thumb over her clit, and a soft moan escapes her lips.

"It's just my body. It's not my mind."

"Mmm. I don't know. I think how your body responds to someone says a lot about how you feel." I lean in close to her ear. "And I think your body responds to me because, deep down, a part of you desperately wants to be consumed by me." I take my time, playing with her pussy. Katia's breath comes out in small pants.

"Never. I never want to be consumed by you."

“You just keep telling yourself that, but we both know it’s not true.” I press a kiss on her cheek just as I press down on her clit.

Katia’s body shudders as she comes again. It’s smaller this time, but I can tell on her face that it’s just as pleasurable. Her legs clamp around my wrist. I continue to touch her until her orgasm is completely finished.

Even once she’s done, I still keep my hand on her.

“See?” I say into her ear. “You like how I touch you. You can’t hide that from me.”

“I’m not hiding anything. I’m just telling the truth. I will never be yours, Alek. Never fully.”

I rip my hand away from her. Her legs immediately close, covering my view of her perfect little pussy. Then I grip her jaw. “Listen to me, Katia. You will be. I’ll never stop until you’re broken down. Until you’re so submissive to me that you don’t know any other way to live. Until you can only think of my name and nothing else. You need to understand this because this is your future.”

She glares at me. “No, it’s not.”

I smile before I press my lips to hers roughly, holding her in place with my grip. I kiss her long enough to make sure she gets a taste of herself before I pull back. “You like how you taste?”

Her cheeks flush, but she still stares at me in defiance. “I’m not going to lower myself to your level by answering. You can toy with me forever, but you will *never* break me down.”

“We’ll just have to see about that.”

CHAPTER 13

Katia

Alek leaves me tied up again once we get back home. He doesn't even bother to stay and taunt me. He just ties the rope around my wrist and ankles and leaves. His actions tonight confuse me. First, he killed a man in front of me. Then he gave me two orgasms on top of a bar. It's been a crazy night.

I hate that my body responds to his touch with ease. I wish I could tell it to stop, but it doesn't listen.

But the image I can't get out of my brain is the splatter of blood from John's head on the walls all around me. It was a miracle none landed on me. I was already panicking, and that would have sent me over the edge into a full-blown panic attack. The fact that Alek left me alone with John's dead body for over an hour just proves how insane he is. That insanity will probably get me killed someday, especially if I don't give him what he wants—control over me.

I lay awake during the night, unable to fall asleep since I see John's dead body and Jeremy's dead body every time I close my eyes. Too much death and darkness.

In the morning, Mila comes into my room and sets a bowl of oatmeal with fruit on the table. She leaves after untying me, making sure to lock the door behind her. I eat in peace, enjoying my time to myself now that I'm not tied to the bed and I don't have Alek hovering over me as I move and breathe. The oatmeal is delicious with a hint of cinnamon in it. Mixed with the blueberries and strawberries, it fills me right up. I'm not sure how long Alek will allow me to eat food like

this before he forces me to eat meat again, but I'm taking any chance I get to eat food I can actually enjoy. It gives me a sense of normalcy in this insane world Alek has forced me into.

I shower quickly before Alek can show up and decide he wants to join me. Then I slip on a new dress, this one a simple lavender color, before pacing around the room. Being able to move my body gives me some peace of mind. Being tied to the bed every night is beginning to make me feel stir-crazy.

I jump when the door opens. It's Alek, of course.

He shuts the door behind him and leans against it, watching me. He likes to do that, I've noticed—watch me without saying anything. I wonder what goes on in his head. Probably thoughts of killing people based on his past actions. I don't really want to be in Alek's head. It doesn't seem like a nice place.

"You look pretty," he finally says.

"It's a dress you chose. None of those clothes are mine."

"You should try and sound more grateful for the things I've given you. I've supplied you with thousands of dollars' worth of dresses. Most women would be overjoyed."

"I also think most women would not appreciate being tied to a bed and locked in a room all night long. I'm nothing special."

Alek smirks. "You are to me." Damn him. I hate how he finds me amusing. If I knew I could scream at him without him mocking me, I would.

"Why am I so special to you? What was it about me that made you decide to do this to me?"

"I saw your picture."

I blink. "That's it? You saw my picture and became obsessed with me?"

"Your father offered you to me, and when I saw your photo, I knew you needed to be mine. A good mafia girl would be the most fun to corrupt."

“You’re sick.”

“I’ve been called ruthless, cold-hearted, and a monster but never sick. I’m not an insane man, Katia. I’m your husband.”

I have no clue how to respond to that. “Was there something you needed? Time to take me back to the club?”

“Oh, you’re not going to the club today. I have different plans in mind for you.”

I really hate the sound of that. “What plans?”

His gaze turns gleeful, making me uneasy. “You’ll just have to wait and see. I’ll be back in a few hours,” he says before leaving.

I’m not tied up, for which I’m grateful, but it makes me even more worried that Alek is up to something not good. Well, he’s never up to anything good. But with him being so secretive, I’m extra nervous.

After pacing my room for several hours, Alek returns, carrying a box. The box looks elegant, painted white, with a bow on top.

“What this?” I ask as he hands it over.

“Just open it.”

I do as he says. Inside, a light blue lacy lingerie outfit is nestled in tissue paper. My heart picks up its pace. It’s a lot finer than the outfit he made me wear at the club. There’s a pair of heels to go with it. “What’s this for?”

“It’s for tonight.”

“A special occasion?” I gulp. Something about this doesn’t sit right with me.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I’m having some of my men over tonight for dinner.” He trails his fingers over my shoulder. “And you’re on the menu.”

I drop the box. “What? What do you mean *I’m* on the menu?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. Now, put that on. I want to see you in it right away.”

He stands there, watching me, clearly with no intention of looking away. Objecting would be futile, so I push down my anger and fear and slip my dress off. I try to turn away from him to take my bra off, but he stops me. “No. I want to see you.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I unclasp my bra and drop it to the ground. Alek eyes my breasts like he wants to eat them. Well, he did say I was on the menu tonight. What the actual hell does that mean? Will he finally kill me and eat me like a cannibal? Or is this something sexual, like how he put his mouth on me yesterday? I’m a little afraid to find out.

I slip my underwear down, now fully naked before him. It never seems to get any easier, no matter how many times I’ve been naked with him.

Alek nods at the lingerie, and I put it on. It’s a lacy light blue number that hugs my body and flares around my hips. Thigh-high tights in the same blue color attach to the ends of the ensemble with a garter belt. The heels match and are just as uncomfortable as one would imagine. I’ve never worn such luxurious lingerie before. In another life, I would’ve loved to have worn something like this for Alek.

But in this life, I want to tear it off and burn it to the ground.

Alek grabs my hair and fluffs it around my shoulders. “There. You look stunning. Let’s go.” He holds out his arm to me, and I have no choice but to take it.

Alek guides me downstairs, where I hear music playing softly as well as the murmur of men’s voices. I didn’t even hear his men arrive. That’s how soundproof the bedroom is. No one can hear me scream from inside.

We round the corner and enter the living room, where ten men mingle. They’re all in suits like Alek, wealth screaming off them.

As Alek and I stand in their doorway, I see their gazes focus on me and my body. I want to curl into a ball and never see sunlight again. The intimacy of this is worse somehow than how the men at the club looked at me. At the club, thanks to the other women and the guards, I felt like I had an ounce of protection. But here, I'm all alone in Alek's house—the only woman. I don't even see Mila. I have no protection because Alek is the one throwing me to the wolves.

“Gentleman,” Alek says, nodding at the men. I see Mikhail, but I don't recognize anyone else. Then, when my eyes land on a man with a scar on his face, I realize I know him. He killed Jeremy. Yuri, I believe his name is.

Yuri catches my gaze and gives me a dark smile. I quickly look at the floor.

“My lovely wife,” Alek continues speaking. “What do you make of her?”

“She's beautiful, Alek,” a man says. He looks around the same age as Alek.

“She really is, Dimitri. She really is. And she's all mine. So don't even think of touching her. You can look but do not touch.”

All the men nod. They probably know Alek would kill them if they did. I wonder what it's like to work for a man like Alek, to be so afraid of him and yet in awe of him. I can see it all on their faces. They want to be *him*.

Alek settles on one of the couches and pulls me into his lap. “Now, let's discuss business.” He places his hand on my lower abdomen, right above my pubic mound. He wouldn't try and touch me like that in front of all of these men, would he?

I don't really pay attention to their discussion. Mostly it's about gun shipments and growing Alex's businesses. Mikhail makes mention of a man named Gabriel Rossi, and Alek shuts that down quickly. The entire time, Alek draws circles with his finger on my lower stomach. That familiar throb in my core returns. I hate myself for it. His touch makes me feel more

desired than I've ever felt, even though I don't want it to. I hate Alek. I have no desire for him.

Just try telling my body that.

Alek finally announces it's time for dinner. Mikhail tosses me a sympathetic look as we head into the dining room. I just look away. I don't want Alek to catch on that Mikhail offered to help me. I hid the card in my bra until I got back home and could stuff it under the mattress after Mila untied me this morning. It's just sitting there, waiting to be discovered. It's thrilling but also completely terrifying.

The men settle around the dining room table while Alek and I remain standing. Mila appears and puts plates down in front of each of them. Then she scurries away.

I keep waiting for Alek to take his seat and for him to pull me onto his lap, but he doesn't. It quickly becomes apparent that he has a different plan.

"Gentlemen, while we feast tonight, I want you all to watch me feast on my wife."

No. He did not just say that. My heart skips a beat before resuming at a fast rhythm.

The men look at each other, all of them smiling indulgently. They all like this. None of them object. I glance at Mikhail. Even he's smiling. Is that just for show or because that's really how he feels? Does he also find my humiliation amusing?

Alek turns to me. "Katia, lay down on the table."

I can't move. Everyone is looking at me.

Alek sighs before grabbing my hips and hoisting me onto the table. Then he pushes me back until I'm lying down. I keep my gaze locked on the chandelier above me, but out of the corner of my eye, I can see Mikhail on one side of me and Dimitri on the other. All of the men look at me like a pack of wolves who haven't eaten in months.

I hold my breath as Alek takes his seat.

“Well, gentlemen, eat,” he announces. The clatter of silverware is loud in the room. It makes me shiver.

Alek grabs my thighs and pushes them up to my chest. At least the lingerie covers my most intimate area, but it doesn't leave much to the imagination. The fabric, despite being light blue, is almost see-through.

I wait for Alek to do to me what he did last night, but he doesn't. Instead, he strikes up a conversation with Dimitri, something about financial statements. He has me spread out on the table and has the audacity to ignore me. Another form of humiliation,

I really fucking hate him.

Throughout dinner, Alek talks to his men like I'm not even there. The anticipation is killing me. Is he going to touch me or not? Do I want him to or not?

Either way, this waiting game is torture.

Finally, Alek leans down between my legs and nuzzles me with his nose. I clasp my hands together and pray that I don't make a sound. These men can't see that I like Alek's touch. It would make me even more ashamed.

“She smells like a sweet vanilla,” Alek murmurs.

“Fuck, you're so lucky,” one of Alek's men says. I don't know which one. I can't see him.

“I am, aren't I?” Alek then presses a kiss directly to my folds. My hips jerk up on instinct, and all the men chuckle. My cheeks flush as I hope and pray for this to be over soon.

“Do you all want to see how truly lucky I am?” he asks his men. A murmur of assents sounds out. “Wonderful.”

Before I can brace myself, Alek rips the panties off me. I whimper and try to hold back tears. My vulva is on display for all these men to see. I can hear them straining in their seats to get a look at me.

“She's a vision,” Dimitri says like I'm not even here.

“What I would give to be you,” another man says.

Alek smiles. "I know." Then he leans in and begins to pleasure me with his mouth. God, it feels just as good as it did yesterday. I press my hands over my mouth to stop myself from moaning.

"Awe, poor thing," Dimitri says. "She's holding back."

Alek licks up my slit, and the suddenness of it makes me cry out from behind my hands.

"Come on, baby," a man says. "You can let go."

"Fuck," someone else murmurs.

I shut my eyes and try to drown out the men. This can't be happening. It just can't.

Alek inserts in tongue into me, and it takes everything in me not to moan. I hate him for making this feel so good.

"That's it," someone says.

"What I would give to see her come," Dimitri says.

Alek grips my thighs harder as he roughly pleasures me with his tongue. He keeps moving it in and out of me, swiping it over my clit, and sending me to the edge. I can't believe I'm so close to orgasm. I don't want these men to see.

"What I would give to see her get fucked," Yuri says. I recognize his voice from the night he killed Jeremy.

"Only by me," Alek growls, lifting his head. "Remember that, men. Only me."

I can hear them all agree before Alek resumes his pleasuring me.

"You haven't fucked her yet, have you?" Dimitri asks.

"No." Alek kisses my clit. A moan slips past my hands. "I wanted her to remain a virgin a little bit longer."

"Fuck," Dimitri and a few of the other men say. "So innocent."

Someone trails their fingers over my arm.

My eyes pop open to see it was Dimitri. Alek glares at him until he pulls his hand away.

I gasp as Alek swipes his tongue over me. I'm so close. My body is like a tightly pulled wire, ready to be released.

My eyes look over at Mikhail, who's watching me with an expression I can't make out. Is it pity? Is it amusement? Is it desire? No matter the reason, it doesn't make me feel comfortable. I turn my eyes back to Alek, who catches my gaze. Watching him pleasure me with his mouth is too much to bear, and finally, *finally*, it happens.

My release hits me. My cries are muffled behind my hands. My hips have a mind of their own as they rise, desperate to get closer to Alek's mouth.

"Beautiful," Dimitri murmurs.

I can hear a few men mutter, "Fuck."

Alek kisses my bundle of nerves once more before sitting back. He doesn't even bother to wipe his mouth.

I lay on the table, spent. Though I have the awareness to close my legs and bring them close to my chest so the men can't look at my intimate area ever again.

"Best dinner I've ever gone to," Yuri says.

Everyone except me laughs. I'm trying to hold back tears.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for coming over tonight. I'll walk you all out."

"We don't get the chance to stare at your wife longer?" Yuri asks.

Alek shakes his head. "Afraid not. I'd like some alone time with her. I'm sure you can all understand."

Even though some look disappointed, they still follow Alek out of the room. Mikhail shoots me a look before he goes that says, *Let me help you*. But can I trust him? He was looking at me the same way the others were. And can I really trust a man willing to betray his boss? Because helping me escape would be a betrayal to Alek. He'd kill Mikhail for it, I'm sure.

Once all the men leave the room, I finally let myself cry. Tears stream down my face so fast they leave little droplets on the wood.

And here I am, curled into a ball on a dining room table, in an expensive lingerie set, listening to men who just watched my husband eat me out laugh in the other room like nothing is amiss.

I've never felt more utterly alone in my life.

CHAPTER 14

Katia

Alek returns to the dining room once all the men have left. I don't move. He has humiliated me more times than I can count—he doesn't get the right to make me move.

He takes his seat, and as if on cue, Mila brings him a plate of food, then leaves. Alek eats like I'm not even here. Like he didn't just put his mouth on me in front of his men. I look at him with disgust. He's a monster to do the things he does to me.

The only response he gives me comes from his eyes. They keep a steady watch on me as he eats. His unnerving, beautiful blue eyes. My eyes flick to a fork near my head. Mila hasn't cleaned up the other plates yet. I could grab that fork and stab it into his eye. I'm sure Alek would kill me for that, but at least I would have a moment of satisfaction before my death.

My hand inches toward the fork.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, don't," he finally speaks.

I jump slightly before stopping my hand. He's already onto me. I've barely moved an inch, and he already caught me.

Alek wipes a napkin over his lips before pushing his plate away. "You did good tonight."

"It didn't feel good. It felt humiliating."

"Are you sure it didn't feel good? I'm fairly certain I made you come."

My face flushes as I look away from him. I keep my eyes plastered on the fork. So close and yet impossible to get to. I daydream images of it jammed into his eye.

Alek smiles knowingly at my lack of a response. I hate that he has such a good read on me. I wish I could say the same for him, but he still manages to confuse me completely. “Let me put you to bed. You must be tired.”

I remain curled into my ball, but that doesn’t stop Alek from scooping me into his arms and carrying me to the bedroom. Once he sets me down on the bed, I keep my body still as he slips my heels off. A sigh of relief escapes me. Alek keeps his hands on my ankle for a moment before stepping back.

“I think you’ve earned the right to spend the night without being tied up. How does that sound?”

I can’t be hearing this right. “Really?”

“Yes. I can be nice.”

I have to hold back a snort. The last word I’d use to describe Alek is *nice*. But I’m not going to push my luck, so all I say is, “Thank you.” I want to spit out how much I hate him, but that won’t win me any brownie points.

Alek smiles smugly like he’s won this round. “You’re very welcome. But first, I want you to take that off.” He nods at the lingerie.

I force myself to stand. It’s just like any other time, I remind myself. Alek has seen me naked before. God, he’s touched me in such intimate places that I shouldn’t still feel embarrassed. But with him watching me so intensely, it’s hard not to feel intimidated.

Alek watches me greedily as I strip off the stockings. Once those are off, I take a deep breath before slipping the rest of the outfit off. Standing completely naked before Alek takes a lot of willpower.

He reaches out and brushes his hand between my breasts. “So beautiful,” he murmurs, tracing his fingers down my body.

I suck in a breath as he swipes his fingers across my folds. “And so wet. Are you always this wet for me, Katia?”

“It’s just my body’s instinct.”

“No, I don’t think so.” He brings his fingers to his lips. “You always taste so good. I might have to eat you up again.”

My entire body comes alive at his words. Despite how much I hate him, he does manage to make my body feel amazing.

He drops his hand. “But then again, maybe not.”

I can’t deny my slight disappointment.

“You are not to get dressed,” he says. “Now, go to bed.”

I climb under the covers as fast as I can, with Alek watching me with that cold, detached expression. “How come you never join me?” I ask, blurting the question out. Not that I want Alek to join me in bed, but it has been something I’ve wondered.

He raises an eyebrow. “Do you want me to join you?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I was just curious.”

He pushes a piece of my hair behind my ear. “I can’t have you getting too comfortable with me. Where would be the fun in that? Now, sleep.” He leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

I curl into a ball, happy to least not be tied up. There’s not much joy in my new life, but I can at least be happy about that.

ALEK BRINGS me back to the strip club the next day. It’s starting to become a habit, I realize. Like all the times before, we’re the first ones to arrive.

Alek walks me to the changing room, where he leans against one of the counters, looking more intense than usual. I wring my hands into the blue fabric of my dress.

“Yes?” I ask.

“I think it’s time.”

“Time?”

“For you to get naked on stage.”

All my breath leaves my body. No, this can’t be happening. I thought if I had to work here, the one consolation was that I didn’t have to get naked for strange men.

“But—”

He cuts me off. “No buts, Katia. You’re getting naked on the stage tonight.”

“I thought you didn’t want any other man to see me naked.”

He shrugs. “I’ve changed my mind. After last night, I realized how good it feels to show you off. I want to do the same here. I want every man in the audience to desire you, to want to fuck you, all the while knowing you’re mine. I want to see the jealousy on their faces knowing they don’t get to touch you. Only *I* get to do that.”

I know there’s no talking Alek out of something once he’s put his mind to it. “What should I wear?” I whisper, nodding at the clothes rack.

“I have just the thing.” He leaves me in the changing room, returning a minute later with a box in his hand. It’s the same type of box as from last night. “Open it.”

I do, and inside, it’s more lingerie, but this time, it’s completely white.

“I want those men to see your innocence. It’ll make them even more jealous.”

I swallow hard as I take the skimpy outfit and hold it up. It’s practically see-through in the light.

“Put it on for me now,” he instructs, resuming his casual stance against the counter.

I know the drill. There’s no way out of this.

Alek's expression doesn't change as I get naked in front of him. Only a slight eagerness enters his gaze once I've put on the lingerie. It's a full-body set with scraps of lace that cover my nipples and pubic mound. Just like the other set, it has thigh-high stockings that attach to the end of the body piece. This outfit doesn't leave much to the imagination, and I can practically see all of myself in the mirror.

He touches one of the straps, his fingers grazing my shoulder. "No more cheap stripper clothes for you. You deserve only the finest pieces of clothing on your body." I hold my breath as Alek stands up, places his finger under my chin, and tilts my head up. His lips hover over mine. "I want to kiss you so fucking badly."

I hold still, waiting to see what he'll do. I'm not sure what I want. I want him to kiss me; I don't want him to kiss me.

But then he makes a decision.

He presses his lips to mine in a kiss that starts off surprisingly gentle before turning into something rougher. He spins me around and presses me against the counter. There's a clatter as makeup falls over in every direction. A low growl escapes him, and I gasp into his mouth as he deepens the kiss.

The door flies open.

Alek doesn't seem bothered by it and continues to kiss me. I open my eyes, though, and spot Anya in the doorway, looking pissed. I keep my eyes planted on her as Alek kisses me. I want her to see this. She needs to know that Alek is *my* husband, not her pretend boyfriend.

The surge of possessiveness scares me. I don't want Alek. I can't.

Alek finally stands back, keeping his eyes on me. "When you dance tonight, keep your eyes on me." With those words, he leaves, not even glancing in Anya's direction.

As Anya scowls and sits down to apply her makeup, I take a moment to catch my breath. Alek has never kissed me like that before, and I'm not sure what to make of it.

Anya meets my eyes in the mirror. “You must think you’re so special, huh?”

“Not at all.”

That’s clearly not the answer she expected. “Well ... whatever.” She resumes putting on her makeup.

The other women begin to trickle in. First Kitty, then Alison and Lizzie, and then finally Stacey. Each woman must be able to sense the tension between Anya and me because they keep their heads down and don’t say a word. Even Stacey, who’s normally a chatterbox, doesn’t talk with her usual pep.

I keep to myself, bracing for tonight. Alek is making me get naked on stage for the first time. I might pass out before that can even happen.

The club opens, and men come in, meaning it’s time for the women to put on a show.

I keep to the back like usual as I watch first Kitty dance, enticing the men with cute dance moves, and then Lizzie, who seduces the men with her very large bosom. The men go wild for her.

Stacey approaches me. “How are you holding up? It was tense back there between you and Anya.”

“Anya’s just being Anya.”

Stacey snorts. “You can say that again. But you seem even tenser than usual. You ok, hon?” She squeezes my arm.

“Alek is making me get naked on stage tonight,” I whisper.

Her eyes widen before she nods. “Ok. I can understand why you feel so tense, then. If you need some advice, I’m here.”

“I could use some, in fact.”

“Well, getting naked on stage the first time can be nerve-racking. I know I almost passed out; I was so nervous. But then you start to feel powerful. Sure, we’re all being objectified, which sucks, but you have to make the most of it. Find power where you can. Hopefully, that helps.”

“Thanks. It does.” It really doesn’t. I appreciate Stacey’s words, but I’m not sure they’re going to help me tonight.

She pats my arm before sauntering off to serve drinks. One man pulls her onto his lap, and she starts giving him a lap dance. She looks so confident, and I’m glad she’s tried to make the most of her situation. I just wish she was never in this situation to begin with.

Anya comes up on stage next. Her movements are effortless like she was born to be a dancer. She strips her clothes off and tosses them to Alek, who’s in the front row. He doesn’t bother picking them up, which makes me glad. He’s talking to Mikhail next to him, not even looking in Anya’s direction. I can tell this hurts her. She tries harder to get his attention by lying on her back and spreading her legs wide. The entire room can see all of her, and the men whoop and holler. I avert my eyes. I don’t need to see that much of Anya.

She finishes her dance and storms off the stage in a huff. I watch, amused, before my name is announced. It’s time for me to dance.

Somebody, anything, help me.

I walk shakily onto the stage. Alek turns his attention to me and doesn’t make a move to look away. He told me to keep my eyes on him. I don’t intend to break that. Even though Alek scares me, at least I know he wants to protect me in some strange way. All these other men are strangers, and I don’t know what they’re capable of.

I start dancing as best as I can in six-inch heels. Men begin to clap and cheer me on, which gives me the tiniest bit of confidence. Maybe Stacey was onto something.

After trying my best to dance around the stage and the pole, it’s time. I keep my gaze on Alek as I slip off the lingerie set. I don’t bother dragging it out. The sooner I get naked, the sooner I can leave this stage. I stand there in nothing but thigh-high leggings and heels.

The men in the audience whistle and call out my name. Money gets thrown at me and onto the stage, and I’ve never

felt more worthless. I'm not someone to be bought, yet here I am, forced into being a stripper.

Alek leans forward in his seat, his blue eyes intent on me. I need to move. I can't just stand here looking awkward.

So, I do the only thing that makes me feel somewhat comfortable. I walk down the steps to Alek and sit on his lap. He seems surprised at first but then smiles. I actually took him by surprise. Talk about feeling powerful.

I lace my hands around his neck and move my hips the same way I noticed the other women doing during lap dances. Alek rests his hands on my hips while looking at me with a lazy expression. I can feel the gazes of the other men on my back, but I keep my eyes on Alek. I can't mess up now. I need to gain some kind of power over him.

So, I let go of his neck and try to stand up. He squeezes my hips for a moment, not letting me go for a moment. But then he relents, and I walk back up on stage.

There's no way I'm touching that pole while naked, so I dance around the stage instead.

I get close to the edge of the stage when a man's hand reaches out and skims my waist. I jerk back so fast that I fall onto my butt, landing hard. God, that hurt.

Everything next seems to happen in slow motion.

Alek storms onto the stage, walks up to the man who touched me, and punches him square in the nose, making a few of the men next to him shout. The man falls back, blood squirting out of his nose. The bouncer runs into the room and helps the man up before leading him outside.

Alek stands there for a moment, breathing heavily, his fist clenched. Then he moves and helps me stand. The club is silent except for the pounding music as the men in the audience watch us walk off the stage. I catch a look at Stacey, and she's staring wide-eyed, her mouth open.

Even though it wasn't my fault, I can't help the shame that courses through me. I keep my head down as Alek tugs me behind him, taking me into the changing room.

He slams the door shut. “What the fuck was that man thinking?” He punches one of the mirrors, breaking it.

I flinch back. “It wasn’t my fault.”

He stares at me, still breathing heavily, his knuckles bloody. Forcing himself to calm down, he says, “I know it wasn’t. You were only doing what I told you to.”

“Ok,” I whisper.

Alek takes in a deep breath before letting it out. “Ok. Fuck,” he mutters before leaving the room.

I’m left standing there, unsure of what to do.

CHAPTER 15

Katia

I decide to get dressed. Even if that isn't what Alek wants, he's not here to tell me otherwise. The minute my dress is on, I feel like I can think again.

Alek asked me to get naked on stage. I did that. It wasn't my fault a strange man tried to touch me. It wasn't my fault Alek decided to punch him. And it wasn't my fault that Alek dragged me into this room and punched a mirror.

None of this is my fault.

And yet, why do I feel like I'm to blame?

Alek's good at messing with my head. That's what he wanted to do from the get-go—to break me down until I was a shell of myself.

I promised I would never let him succeed, but I can't help but feel that some of his torture has trickled into me. I'm not my normal self. I'm more insecure and possessive. I'm more unhinged.

I hate that Alek has made me feel this way. This is all his fault.

And that's why I need to get away.

I'm sitting down when Stacey enters the room. "Katia, are you ok? I saw what the boss did to that man. He just punched him! I saw blood on the floor. That's how hard the punch was." Stacey takes her seat next to me, grabbing my hands. I didn't even realize they were shaking until just now. "I knew

the boss was a tough man, but I've never seen him act like that before. It was ... scary, I'll admit."

"He scares me," I whisper.

"I believe it. I can't believe you're married to a man like that."

"I didn't really get a choice. He tricked me into marrying him. My father sold me to him to pay off his debts."

"You poor thing." She pulls me into a hug, squeezing me tight. This is the first comfort I've felt since Alek entered my life. Pulling back, she tells me, "I started working here because I owed Mr. Antonov money. He told me what was expected of me at the job, and I knew if it meant I wouldn't die, I'd take it. Since working here, I haven't been afraid. I have my freedom outside of this job. You told me that first day that he's keeping you captive. And it's obvious you don't have any freedom, either here or at home. You asked me to help you that first day, but I said no. I couldn't risk what I've built."

"And I understand that."

"But seeing how Mr. Antonov reacted ... That was the first time I've ever truly been scared of him. The anger on his face was ..." She shivers.

"Stacey, you don't even know."

"Know what?"

I lean in closer. "Alek killed a man in one of the privacy rooms. He killed a man right before my eyes."

"What?! Why?"

"Because Anya told him I was flirting with that man. Which was a lie."

"Anya's a bitch. But I never thought she'd go to that lengths to make up rumors."

"Well, she did. And a man died for it. I'm scared Alek will get to a point where he kills everyone around me, so it's only him and me on this earth. I'm scared he might even kill me."

“God, I’m so sorry.” She hugs me again. “I wish I could help you.”

“You can. You can help me escape.”

Stacey hesitates. “But ...”

“I know you’re scared of him. I am, too. We could escape together.”

“But I don’t have any money, Katia. It goes either to food, rent, or back into Mr. Antonov’s pockets.”

“I think you can call him Alek, Stacey.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I suck in a deep inhale. “Ok. So, neither of us has any money. But we can go to the police. Alek runs the mafia. I’m sure the police are itching to catch him. We could turn him in.”

“With what proof?”

I pause. Damn it. She’s right. I have nothing to give to the police except my word, and without proof, I’m sure he could wiggle his way out of trouble.

“Then we think of something,” I finally say. “I just can’t stay married to him a moment longer. Please help me, Stacey. *Please*. I have no one else to turn to.”

Stacey stares at me for a moment before nodding. “Ok. I’ll help you. But if we’re going to do this, then we need to do it right now while he doesn’t have his eyes on you. I saw him before I came in here. He’s at the bar. If we leave now, we can sneak out the back door.”

“What about guards?”

“I’ve seen them before. They usually just rotate around, so we’ll have time to sneak past them, but we need to leave now.”

“Ok.” I nod at her clothes. “Do you want to change real quick?”

Stacey stands up and hands me her keys. “Katia, I’m staying.”

“What?”

“I’ll help you get out. Those keys are to my car. I don’t like taking public transport,” she explains. “But I’m staying. I’m done looking over my shoulder.”

“No, come with me.”

“No,” she says firmly.

“Stacey, I can’t take your car. It’s too much.”

“It’s a hunk of junk. It’s a small yellow thing. You can’t miss it. Use it to get out of the city. Just drop it off somewhere and call me when you do, so I can get it back.”

“I don’t have a cell phone. Alek took mine.”

“Well, then, borrow someone’s phone, ok? Here.” She grabs a napkin, scribbles her number onto it, and then stuffs it into my hand. “Now, let’s go.” She ushers me to the door, and together, we walk into the hallway. No use arguing. The backdoor is noticeable from here. Just a few feet and I’ll be free.

After ensuring no one’s following us, we hurry to the door.

“Will it make a sound when we open it?” I whisper.

Stacey shakes her head. “No. I think that’s why Alek has the guards. I think he finds it fun to hurt people.”

“That sounds like my husband.” I open the door and take a second, waiting to see if anyone will come rushing at me. When no one does, I open it wider. Outside is just an alleyway. Looking down it, I see a man, his back to me, pacing with a gun.

“Crap, there’s a guard,” I say, sticking my head back in.

“Let me handle it.” Stacey stands up taller and heads outside. I peek out to watch. She approaches the guard, saying something to him. As they chat, he looks like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Then Stacey grabs his face and kisses him, the guard responding eagerly. I can hear their moans from where I stand. I take it that’s my cue.

I’m about to run outside when I hear a voice behind me ask, “Where do you think you’re going?” I look over my

shoulder.

It's Anya.

I don't have time for this. I just run out the door and down the alleyway. Stacey is still kissing the guard. I keep running until I make it onto the sidewalk, my lungs burning from the exertion. Being tied up all the time is taking a toll on my physical health.

I run into a woman who's hunched over. "Watch it," she grumbles.

"Sorry," I squeak before breaking out into a run. Or as best I can in high heels. Alek doesn't have a pair of flats anywhere in the closet full of clothes he gave me. I'm starting to understand why.

I keep running until I'm in the parking lot, which is around the corner from the club. My eyes scan for Stacey's car and finally land on it. An ugly yellow thing, she said. I try the keys in the door, and it opens right up.

My heart is beating so fast even when I get inside and lock the door. My heart feels like it will beat right out of my chest as I turn the car on and back up. The car sounds like it's groaning in pain, but at least it will offer me some protection from Alek.

I slam on my breaks when I get to the edge of the parking lot.

Alek is right there, pointing his gun at me.

Shit, shit, shit.

Anya saw me. She must have told Alek. Fuck her.

Well, I'll just have to run him down, I guess. I've never committed any act of violence. It's a big part of why I'm a vegan. But at this moment, I'm contemplating killing my husband. That's what he's turned me into.

A monster just like him.

I floor the car and gun it right for him. I hope it hits him. I hope it doesn't.

Alek ends up deciding for me.

He jumps out of the way without firing his gun.

I drive away. I don't find any comfort in it, especially when I look in the rearview mirror and see Alek's car behind me. That didn't take him long. His car is much faster than Stacey's. He'll catch up to me in no time.

And when he gets me ... what will he do to me?

I didn't think this plan through. I just acted on instinct.

Alek sidles his car up to mine and drives over until he's about to hit me, forcing me to drive off the road to avoid being hit. The problem is, now I'm on the sidewalk. I can't let an innocent person die.

I have no choice.

I slam on the breaks.

Alek pulls his car right up to mine and gets out. I'm blocked in. His car on one side and people walking on the other.

A scream erupts from me as I begin pounding my hands into the steering wheel. This can't be. It just can't.

Alek tries my door, but it's still locked. Then he slams his fist into the window. The sound makes me jump.

"Don't even think about it," he says, his voice muffled by the glass. "I've got you, Katia. If you get out of the car now, your punishment won't be as severe."

I glare at him. He's taken away all of my autonomy. I have nothing left. Not even a chance to escape.

It's like I'm watching my body from the outside as I unlock the door. Alek rips it open and grabs me, dragging me to his car and forcing me inside. He pushes me so hard that my elbow bangs against the armrest. He's never been this rough with me, which makes me feel even more pathetic.

Alek is fuming as he gets into the car and drives us home. His knuckles are white around the steering wheel, and his chest is heaving.

“Are you going to kill me?” I ask.

“Katia, if I were you, I’d be quiet right now.” The calmness in his voice terrifies me. It’s in direct contrast to the anger radiating off him.

I’m silent the rest of the ride home. Once we’re there, Alek is by my door in a second, pulling me out and forcing me to follow him inside and up the stairs. He tosses me onto the bed. Before I can scramble away, he grabs my hips and flips me around onto my stomach.

“Please,” I beg, trying to get away.

“Shut up,” he growls as he lifts my dress and rips my underwear off. “You’ve lost any privileges to talk.” Then he spanks me so hard I see stars.

His spanking is ruthless. Slap after slap. The skin of my butt burns, and I cry out with every spank. He’s not here to offer me relief. He’s here to make sure I suffer the consequences of my actions.

I can’t even kick as he pins me down. Just spank. Spank. Spank. Each one harder than the last. My ass will be bruised after this. Hot tears spill down my cheeks.

“You.” Slap. “Tried.” Slap. “To.” Slap. “Leave.” Slap. “Me!”

“Please,” I cry as he continues his cruel torment of my behind. “Please, let me explain.”

“There’s nothing for you to explain.” Spank. “You tried to leave me, Katia.” Spank. “I told you that I own you!” Spank. Spank. “You’re never going to leave me again, you understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand. Just, please! Please stop.” The last word comes out in a sob.

By some miracle, Alek listens to me. He stops, but I just cry harder.

“You’re mine, Katia. You will never leave me.”

“Ok, ok.” I sniffle. “Ok.”

I can hear Alek's heavy breathing. Before I can react, he flips me around onto my back. I wince as my butt touches the mattress. Even though I'm desperate to move, I stay still. I don't want to piss him off even more.

Alek walks into the closet and returns with something small in his hands. It's sleek and black. I frown, wondering what it is.

He holds it up. "It's a vibrator," he explains. "Have you ever used one on yourself?"

I shake my head. I never even thought of getting one for myself. My dad would have thrown a hissy fit if I had.

"Good." He kneels on the bed and grabs my legs, spreading them wide. "Take off your dress."

With shaky hands, I grab the hem of my dress and slip it over my head. Alek waits until I realize what he wants. I reach around and unclasp my bra, taking that off, too.

"Better," he says. "Now, try to remain still." He pushes my legs wide again, then turns the vibrator on. Its buzz sends shivers through me.

Alek presses it to my bundle of nerves. Holy shit. The sudden intensity of it is like nothing I've ever felt before. My hips jerk up.

Alek chuckles darkly as he presses a hand over my hips, holding me down. "I said, remain still." He presses the vibrator harder against my clit. My entire body feels like it's been lit on fire.

"Oh," I gasp, clutching the bed sheets under me. My body is already shaking. "Please, turn it off. It's too much. Too much."

"Good." Alek presses a button on it, revving up the intensity.

"Oh!"

Alek watches me in amusement as he circles the vibrator around my clit. Each movement sends another wave of intense pleasure over me. It's so intense that it almost hurts.

He presses it against my bundle of nerves again, and in an instant, I come. I cry out as my body shudders from its release.

I think Alek will stop, but he doesn't. He keeps the vibrator pressed against me, sending even more painful pleasure over me.

"Stop," I gasp out, whipping my head back and forth. "Please, stop."

"No."

The vibrator pulses against my clit. A steady rhythm that feels so good and yet so painful.

"I don't think you've had enough," he murmurs before upping the intensity level of the vibrator.

I need to get away from it. It's too much. I feel like I might die from the pleasure of it.

Without warning, another orgasm washes over me. The moan that escapes me is embarrassing. Alek just looks smugger as he moves the vibrator.

My brain becomes foggy from the pleasure. It's unrelenting.

I clench my hands over my abdomen, trying to stop the pleasure arising from there. But Alek is ruthless with the vibrator and doesn't let me get a break, not even for a second.

My hips try to jerk up when *another* orgasm hits me, but Alek is too strong. "Please, stop. Please, Alek. Please."

"Not until you call out my name. Call out my name the next time you come, and I'll stop."

"Why?"

"Because I need to know that *you* know you're mine."

"Please!" I gasp when he begins rubbing the vibrator up and down my clit. "Please." My legs feel like jelly. My lungs are out of air. My head feels like it's in a dream from the foginess. It's too much.

"Just call out my name, Katia. Simple as that."

I can't. I refuse to.

And yet ... I need this torture to end.

I can feel the sensations of another orgasm coming on. If I call out Alek's name, this will be over. But that means sacrificing my pride. I'm just not sure how much longer I can hold out.

My eyes lock with Alek's. Their intensity almost makes me come. This is it. I know what I have to do.

The moment I feel my fourth orgasm consume me, I open my mouth and call out his name. "Alek!" I hate it. I also hate how nicely his name passes through my lips.

I just need it to end, by whatever means possible.

"Keep saying it," he growls, pushing the vibrator harder against me.

"Alek, Alek," I repeat like a mantra. I say his name so much that I'm not sure he's even forcing me to say it any longer. After a while, his name on my lips starts to sound right. And that terrifies me the most.

Alek finally turns off the vibrator and pulls it away from my body. I shudder as my orgasm ends, then relax into the mattress. In my orgasm-induced state, I forgot all about my ass hurting. Now, the pain returns with a vengeance.

But I'm still so repleted that I don't bother moving. My legs flop open without a care in the world. I rest a hand over my heart, trying to calm down.

Alek watches me, and I just stare back, challenging him.

Finally, he smirks and walks into the closet before coming back out, sans vibrator. Even though the vibrator gave me so much pleasure, I don't think I ever want to see that thing again.

Alek pats my knee. "Now you know who you belong to. I'll let you rest. Tomorrow, we have a big day ahead of us."

I frown, not understanding.

“I’m going to confront the girls at the club. I need to figure out which one helped you escape. When I do, I’m going to kill her. And you’ll be right there next to me while I do it.” He presses a kiss on my head. “Have a good night, Katia.” Then he saunters out of the room.

I blink as I stare at the ceiling, dread filling my heart.

Stacey will die tomorrow.

Because of me.

CHAPTER 16

She thought she could escape me. She actually tried.

The betrayal I feel is deep. Katia is *my* wife. I own her. Yet she dared to run away and would have succeeded if Anya hadn't told me what was happening. I was having a drink at the bar when Anya approached and told me she saw Katia run out the back door. The fact that Katia made it to a car and was driving away meant she had help.

Now I just need to find out who.

Katia is sullen in the morning when I bring her breakfast. She eats her toast obediently, but I can tell she's upset. Probably doesn't want whoever helped her to escape to get killed. Well, that's not my problem. Katia knew better than to run, and whoever helped her should have known better, too. It's not my fault people don't know how to play by my rules.

"All done?" I ask once she pushes her plate away. She nods, not meeting my gaze. "Good. Now, get dressed." Even in the simple white nightgown she has on, she manages to look effortlessly beautiful.

Katia does as I say, goes into the closet, and comes out in a pink summer dress. I don't scold her for not changing in front of me. She's going to have a hard day as it is.

I stop myself. No. I'm not going to feel sympathy for her. She tried to get away from me. Katia needs to earn back my trust, and I won't hand it over freely.

My sudden flicker of pity is gone in an instant. It was just a moment of weakness. Nothing more.

“Come on,” I say, grabbing her hand. We pass Mila on the stairs, who averts her eyes. She’s a good maid—she doesn’t ask questions or interfere.

Katia is quiet all the way to the club. The only indication she’s scared is by how she clasps her hands so hard her knuckles are white.

I turn off the car, and the sudden silence is almost deafening. The tension in the small space ramps up. “You know I’m doing this because of your actions.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Good. You could tell me who helped you. I could make it quick for that person.”

Katia whips her head around to glare at me. “I’m not telling you a thing. You’re going to kill one of my friends because she decided to do a good thing. Why in the world would I even consider ratting her out?”

“Because of what I said. I’ll make her death quick. She won’t feel any pain.”

“No,” she says hotly. “I won’t tell you anything.”

I shrug. “Ok, then. Time to interrogate my staff.”

As we walk into the club, I tug Katia behind me. The staff is waiting for us in the main room as I requested. I’ll need time to figure out who helped Katia and to clean up the dead body before the customers arrive.

All the women are around the bar, chatting to themselves. None of them know what this is about. They’re all in for a huge surprise. A couple of the bouncers and bartenders are here, but since they’re all men, I know they’re not the ones who helped Katia. By her own admission, it was one of the girls.

I clap my hands once, drawing everyone’s attention. “I need you girls to stand in a line. Right here.” I point to the spot in front of me.

Once they’re in formation, I begin. “It’s come to my attention that my wife tried to run away last night. Thankfully,

Anya told me, and I was able to rectify that situation.” I nod at Anya, who stands up straighter and smiles smugly. Katia scowls. Anya gives her a wink.

I carry on. “Now, my wife wouldn’t have been able to escape on her own. That means one of you girls helped her.” I look at Stacey, Kitty, Alison, and Lizzie. “I know it was one of you four.” I look at the bartenders and bouncers. “In fact, you men may leave. I have no need for you.” I stand patiently while the men shuffle out of the club. Once they’re gone, I look back at the girls. “Listen, you’re not in trouble. I just need to know who helped my wife escape.”

I wait, but no one speaks up. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Katia shake her head roughly. I turn to her. “You’re not giving the girls any hints, are you, Katia?”

“No,” she squeaks.

“Mmm.” I stare at Katia, but she keeps her face neutral. “Fine.” I look back at the girls. “I just need to know who helped my wife escape. I need you all to know that you must never do that again. Katia is my wife, not your friend. Don’t get any delusions.” I wait, but still, no one says anything. “Listen, if you come forward, nothing bad will happen. You won’t even lose your job. I just need to know to make sure it never happens again. Understood?” All the girls nod.

Kitty clears her throat.” Sir, I have no clue what you’re talking about. I never saw Katia escape, and I sure didn’t help her.”

“That’s true,” Anya adds. “Kitty was dancing when I came to get you.”

“You’re right. Thank you, Anya.” Anya beams under my praise while Katia looks sicker. “Does anyone else have something to say?”

Alison and Lizzie both shrug. “It wasn’t me,” Alison says.

“And it wasn’t me,” adds Lizzie.

They’re both too nonchalant to be lying. So that just leaves one.

My eyes rest on Stacey, who's staring hard at something on the ground. "Stacey?" She jumps, her eyes flicking up to mine before looking away again. "Do you have anything to add?"

I approach Stacey until we're toe to toe. "Stacey, tell me the truth. Did you help Katia escape? You're not in trouble."

Stacey opens her mouth, but it's Katia who speaks. "No one helped me. I stole Stacey's keys, and I ran. The guard looked in the opposite direction, and I made it to the parking lot. I tried every car until I figured out which keys went to her car. Stacey had nothing to do with this. It was all me. Punish me. Please, Alek."

"You're sweet, Katia," I tell her. "My good girl. You're trying to save your friend. But it's obvious by how hard you're working to come up with a lie that Stacey was the one to help you. Am I right?" I ask Stacey.

Stacey is shaking as she answers. "Yes. It was me."

"No!" Katia screams. All the women jump and look at her in confusion. Even Anya seems rattled by it. "No, please, no."

"Jeez. Dramatic much," Anya mutters.

Katia whirls around to face her. "You don't know what you're talking about, Anya. Just *shut* up."

"Don't tell me to shut up," Anya snaps back.

"Will you both be quiet?" I say. Stacey is still shaking before me. "Stacey, why are you nervous? I said nothing bad will happen to you."

"Lies," Katia interjects. "Run, Stacey. He's going to kill you. Run!" Katia rams right into me. I'll be honest—it surprises me. Enough so that I stumble, and Stacey uses that opportunity to run for the door.

"Damn it," I growl and push Katia away before pulling out my gun. All the women scream as I point it at Stacey. The gun fires.

A bullet lands in the wall next to her head. Stacey yelps and falls to the floor, covering her head and curling into a ball.

Katia runs to her side. “Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

Stacey shakes her head. “He didn’t shoot me.”

Katia turns pleading eyes onto me. “Alek, please don’t do this. Please!”

The rest of the women have taken cover behind the bar. Well, except for Anya, who’s standing in place, her mouth agape. She’s either brave or utterly stupid. I’m banking on stupid.

I hold my gun steady and point it at Stacey’s head. I need to kill her. She helped Katia escape. She can’t keep living after that.

My eyes land on Katia’s beautiful tear-stained face. I’ve done horrible things to her, yet here she is, standing strong, trying to protect her friend. She’s surprised me; I’ll give her that. Most people can’t claim that much.

Katia is begging with her eyes for me not to kill Stacey. If I do, she’ll never forgive me. Do I even care about that? Why do I feel like I do?

Damn her. This was not how any of this was supposed to go. Things were supposed to be simple. I’d break Katia down, and she’d be mine forever. And yet she has continuously remained unbroken and has tried to run more than once. My girl is stronger than I gave her credit for. I don’t know how to feel about that.

What I do know is that I need to teach her a lesson.

I look back at Stacey, who’s crying into Katia’s shoulder as Katia wraps her hands around her as if she’ll be strong enough to keep me from killing her.

This is it. Time to die, Stacey.

I cock my gun, aiming it right at her head ...

... until I lower my arm.

Damn it. Fuck.

I growl as I shove my gun back into my jacket pocket. What the hell has come over me?

Both Katia and Stacey cry out in relief as they hug each other. They go silent as I approach them. “Stacey, you’re fired.” Her face crumples. “Take the win. I could have killed you, and I didn’t. I never want to see you again. You paid off your debts to me a long time ago. Now, leave and never show your face around here again. You are never to contact Katia. Is that understood?”

Stacey nods frantically. “Y-yes. Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now go.”

She scrambles to stand, then runs out of the club. Katia watches her go, tears still streaming down her face.

Then Katia storms up to me and punches her fists into my chest. It’s cute how she thinks that could hurt me. “You take everything from me. Everything!”

I grab her wrists and pull her in close. “I spared Stacey’s life. You should be thanking me.”

“Thank you? You’re a fucking monster!” She rips her wrists from my hands and pounds her fists harder on my chest. It still doesn’t even hurt. Maybe just a tickle at that. “I hate you. I hate you!” I remain still until she cries so hard she crumbles against me.

“You done?” I ask.

She only cries more.

I wrap my arms around her, squeezing tight. Katia tries to get away, but I don’t let her. “You need to know something about me, Katia,” I murmur into her ear. “I’m a cold man. Ruthless. I never let people who’ve wronged me live unless they can pay it back in other ways. But I let Stacey go. I’m not even going to make her pay me back for how she’s wronged me. I did that for *you*. Stacey is alive because of you. Do you understand?”

She glares up at me. “You didn’t do this for me. You did it so I wouldn’t have the only friend I managed to make in this shithole. You took her from me, just like you take everything else from me. You might have shown mercy, but don’t act like you did me a favor because we both know this is just another

way for you to break me down. You want me to be grateful, but that is the furthest thing I feel for you. I only feel hate.”

I hold her for a moment before I let her go. “You know what they say. There isn’t much of a difference between hate and love.” I turn to Anya, who’s still standing in her spot, looking shocked. “You did good.” She blinks before looking at me and giving me a small smile. “If you ever see anything out of place again, don’t hesitate to tell me.” I skim my fingers over her cheek. Anya leans into my touch.

“I’m glad I could make you happy, Alek,” she says.

“I like the way you say my name,” I tell her.

“Alek,” she purrs.

I ignore Katia as I give Anya all of my attention. But out of the corner of my eye, I can see Katia cross her arms around her body as she curls inward. Good. Another lesson she needs to learn. She has no control over me.

I’m the one who has control here.

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you, Anya?” I ask her.

She puts her hands on my chest—a stark contrast to Katia’s fists. “The best, Alek. I always aim to please you.”

I grip her hips. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

A split second of fear enters her eyes before she resumes her seductive expression. “Not at all, Alek. In fact, you could fuck me right here, and I would happily call out your name.”

“You would, huh?”

“Oh, yes.” She says the words like a porn star. Anya knows how to put on a show, even in the strangest of situations.

I step back. “Good. Then get naked.”

Anya doesn’t even hesitate to do what I ask. The other women come out from the bar and watch in confusion as Anya gets naked. She tosses her clothes at me, and I grab her panties, sniffing them. I toss Katia a look. She just looks sick.

“Good,” I say to Anya. “Now get down on your hands and knees, ass in the air.” Anya gets into position. I run my hand over her ass. “I could so easily fuck you right now. And you would let me, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she moans, arching her ass into my hand.

I slide a finger up her pussy. Anya hisses. “You’re wet for me. Even now? Even after what you saw?”

“I don’t care about that. All I care about is you.”

“Such devotion,” I murmur. “That makes you so good, Anya.” She tosses me a smile over her shoulder. “But it also makes you boring.” Her smile falters. “You’re so desperate to please me that you would let me fuck you even after I almost killed Stacey. And I don’t do desperate.” I step back, dropping her panties to the ground.

I turn to Katia. “You could learn a little bit more about devotion.” Her lips part in surprise.

“What about me?” Anya whines, still on her hands and knees.

“Just get dressed,” I snap before turning away. “I want all of you ladies in the changing room right now. Give my wife and me some space.”

The other women practically run down the hallway, but Anya takes her sweet time getting up. Disappointment is written all over her face.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I say to her. “Just go.”

Anya pouts but does as she’s told.

I face Katia. “Now it’s just you and me.”

Katia doesn’t look pleased. She doesn’t look terrified. No, in fact, she looks *angry*.

Another surprise for sure.

CHAPTER 17

Katia

I can't believe him.

First, he tries to kill Stacey, and then, he almost has sex with Anya in front of me. Alek is just trying to mock my feelings.

And it's working.

Seeing Anya get naked for him hurt in a way I didn't expect. When Alek put his hands on her hips, I really thought he would have sex with her right then. It just feels disrespectful—the way he plays with my emotions. I hate him for it.

Thank god he let Stacey live. That's the only good thing that happened tonight. I need to remember that. But he didn't spare her life for me. He did it to mess with me again. Break me down, as he says.

Now he's looking at me like he's surprised I'm angry. Of course I'm fucking angry. I'm tired of him jerking me around as he does. I'm tired of walking on eggshells around him. I'm just tired.

“What did you want?” I snap.

He raises an eyebrow. “No need for the attitude, Katia.”

I huff. “After what you pulled tonight, I think my ‘attitude’ is the least problematic thing.”

Alek rests his hands on my hips. I shove them away, but he promptly puts them back on my waist. “Are you jealous?”

“What?”

“About Anya. Did you really think I’d fuck her in front of you?”

“I don’t know what to think. I know you’re capable of cruelty. I know you’re a monster. Having sex with another woman isn’t completely out of bounds for you.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Are. You. Jealous?”

I hate to admit it, but ... I am. Just the tiniest bit. Minuscule really. But seeing Anya lying naked before him was a sight that made my chest burn.

“No,” I say instead. “I don’t care who you have sex with. If it means you leave me alone, I’d be happy.”

“Mmm. I don’t think so. You see, I don’t want Anya. I want *you*. I know you like my attention.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Some might think that, but I’ve always had a good read on people. And you, my dear Katia, don’t like it when I pay attention to Anya. It’s written all over your face.”

I look away.

“See?” He slides a finger down my cheek. “You can’t even look into my eyes and deny it. You’re slowly becoming mine, aren’t you?”

I shove him away, taking a few steps back. “Never. I will *never* be yours.”

He chuckles. “You can keep telling yourself that, but we both know you’ll give yourself to me one day. Now, I’m tired of all this chit-chat.” He settles into his normal chair by the stage. “I want to see you dance.”

The sudden turn in conversation almost gives me whiplash. “What? Right now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

“Fine. I’ll go change,” I mutter, taking a step toward the changing room.

“Stop. You don’t need to change. Just go up on that stage and give me a private show.”

“What about the other women?”

He shrugs. “What about them?”

“What if they come out?”

“If they know what’s best for them, they won’t.” He leans back in his seat, his legs spread wide. “Right now, this is between you and me. And I want to see you dance *just* for me. Now, get to it.”

I huff as I walk up onto the stage. There’s no music playing, no whistles from a crowd of men, no drinks clanking together in toast. Just silence. It makes the entire thing even more intimidating.

I feel like a little girl in my summer dress on the stage, compared to the usual bra and underwear I’ve worn when I’ve been up here. Even though I’m more covered in my dress, the other outfit helped me not feel like myself, which helped me pretend it wasn’t happening. But now that I’m just in a dress that feels like me, there’s no hiding. Alek is watching me with his intense eyes, and there’s nothing to protect me from him.

I begin to move, deliberately keeping my eyes glued to the ground.

“Look at me,” he snaps.

I meet his gaze. Damn him. He won’t even let me look away.

“Run your hands over your body,” he instructs.

I do as he says, roaming my hands between my breasts down to my stomach. His gaze darkens. I glare at him as I dance. I don’t want him to get any pleasure from this because I don’t. This is a nightmare I’m stuck in.

“Touch your breasts.” He steeples his hands together as he leans forward.

I run my hands over my breasts. I can’t feel much through my bra. Alek seems to like watching me do this, though.

“Take your dress off.”

I sigh as I slip it off me. It lands in a pool around my feet.

“Now, your bra.”

I keep my gaze locked on him as I take my bra off, tossing it toward my dress.

“Now, play with your nipples.” His eyes are so dark they’re almost black.

I gulp as I do what he instructs. I hate to admit it, but it feels good. It’s just a physical response—nothing more. Alek doesn’t say anything right away, so I keep touching my breasts as I sway. That familiar throb enters my core again, shooting right down to the space between my legs. I squeeze my legs together. No, this isn’t supposed to turn me on.

Alek can tell. It’s written all over his face.

“Sit down on the edge of the stage,” he murmurs. “Spread your legs wide.”

I move slowly, getting into position.

“Now, touch yourself. Make yourself come for me.”

I pause. No, I can’t. In all the time we’ve been married, Alek has touched me. He’s the one who’s made me come. I could write it off as just a physical thing. But if he makes me touch myself, then I’ll have no one to blame if I orgasm.

“I don’t have all day, Katia. Touch yourself for me. *Now.*”

I’m not getting out of this. He won’t let me.

With shaky fingers, I slip my hand down to touch myself through my panties. He didn’t say I had to take them off, and I need some level of protection.

Alek growls when I touch my clit and make myself gasp. I rub the bundle of nerves harder as my arousal grows. I’ve never felt more wild and unhinged in my life. Before Alek, I never knew how powerful an orgasm could be. I’ve used my fingers on myself before, but with him watching, it adds a whole other level of intensity that turns me on more than when I was alone.

My hips begin to rock against my hand as I touch myself, pressing my palm down onto my clit. The sudden shoot of pleasure through my body makes me gasp.

Alek leans forward, not taking his eyes off me. “That’s it. Be a good girl for me. Fuck yourself with your finger.”

He has a hold over me because, without hesitating, I slip my hand underneath my panties and insert my finger into me. My fingers are much smaller than Alek’s. It doesn’t feel as satisfying as when he’s used his fingers on me.

“Let me see,” he growls.

I lift my hips and slip my underwear down. Alek grabs my panties before they touch the ground and presses them to his nose. I should be disgusted by it, but at this moment, I only feel arousal.

“Spread your legs wider.”

I do. I keep my finger inside as my palm presses down on my clit. In all the times I’ve touched myself, it was never like this. It was always me fumbling under the covers in the night, hoping my dad wouldn’t figure out what I was up to. Even though he’s not even touching me, Alek still manages to make my skin feel like it’s on fire.

“Oh,” I moan as a sudden intense pleasure hits me.

“You’re close. That’s a good girl. Come for me, baby. Come for me.”

I press my hand down harder against my bundle of nerves, and it’s enough. I gasp as my orgasm washes over me. My legs clamp together, drawing out the sensation. Never have I been able to make myself come like this. It’s all thanks to Alek.

Which makes me hate him even more.

I remove my hand and lay down, too spent to remain sitting. My breath is shaky as I try to calm it down.

Once I feel more stable, I sit up to see Alek watching me in that way of his.

“Feel better?” he asks.

“Shut up.”

He leans back, crossing his arms. “I didn’t even have to touch you to make you feel good. That’s the control I have over you. Admit it.”

An idea occurs to me. I have a way to possibly gain some control over him. I’m just not sure if I’ll be good enough since I’ve never done it before.

Without responding to his comment, I step off the stage and approach him. Alek watches me with curious eyes.

I drop to my knees once in front of him. It’s clear from his expression he wasn’t expecting that. As my hands shake, I reach forward and unzip his pants. Alek’s breath hitches. He doesn’t move or say anything. My gaze is locked on his blue one.

Even though I’ve never done this before, I’ve read enough to have a good understanding of what to do. Let’s just hope all those romance novels I read were not lying to me.

I reach my hand into his pants and grip his length. It’s obvious he’s turned on, which makes me happy. I feel like I’m the only one out of control, but if Alek responds to my body as I do to his, it’ll make me feel less alone in a strange way.

Alek hisses when my hand touches his erection. But it’s not enough to give him a hand job. If I’m to get any control over him, I need to truly surprise him.

I pull his erection out and lean forward. Keeping my eyes on his, I slip my lips around his tip. Ok, so this is a lot more intimidating than I thought it would be, but I just keep it slow.

Alek’s hands clench into the armrests. I lick his tip like a lollipop, testing my technique. I think he likes it, but I can’t just do this forever. I need to make an impact.

While telling myself to remain calm, I open my mouth wider and let him slide his length deeper into my mouth. I can’t get all of him in without becoming uncomfortable, so I go as far as possible. I can’t believe I’m actually doing this.

Alek watches me with so much lust in his eyes that it's almost scary.

I reach my hand up and cup one of his balls, getting a bigger reaction out of him. He groans so loudly that I wouldn't be surprised if the girls in the other room heard. For some reason, that makes me happy. Take that, Anya.

I lick up and down his length, Alek hissing with every swipe of my tongue. It feels good to see him unhinged. He's always the picture of calm. And knowing I'm the one to make him feel this way makes me feel more powerful than I have since he married me.

Alek's eyes slip shut for a moment as he groans again. I wonder if he's close. I've never seen him come before. He's never let me touch him like this. Am I ready for it? I have no clue. What I do know is that I'm getting a reaction out of him, and I'm not going to stop.

"Katia," Alek groans before he grabs my head and pulls me off him. I gasp as I fall back onto my butt.

"Wha ...?"

Alek stuffs his length back into his pants and zips his pants.

I could cry. I wasn't expecting that. He was supposed to come, and I'd have an ounce of control over him. Why can nothing go right?

Alek stands up and grabs my clothes before roughly pulling me up next. "Come on," he growls, putting my dress back on, then tugging me toward the door with my bra and underwear clenched in his other hand.

"Where are we going?" I can still taste him on my tongue.

The intense look he gives me makes me gasp. "I've waited long enough. We're going home."

"Waited for what?"

"To fuck you, Katia. It's time to make you completely mine."

His words startle me so much that all I can do is let him pull me out of the club.

The door slams shut behind us.

CHAPTER 18

Katia

I've never seen Alek drive faster to get home before. It's intimidating. I don't say a word since I'm still reeling from what I did. I put my mouth on Alek's length, and I didn't hate it. I never thought I would enjoy doing that, but the feeling of power that had run through me, knowing *I* was the one to make him lose control, felt great.

It felt like I actually had a say for the first time.

But I didn't expect Alek to react how he did. And now we're going home because, in his words, he wants to "fuck me." This is actually happening. Do I want it to? All I know is my body still feels like it's on fire. I feel antsy and shaky.

Once we get home, Alek shocks me by throwing me over his shoulder. I gasp, gripping his back for some kind of leverage. Alek bounds up the stairs, passing a surprised Mila, before going into the bedroom and throwing me onto the bed.

Before I even get the chance to react, he flips me onto my stomach and lifts my dress.

"Wait," I say, feeling the first stirrings of panic.

He spanks my ass in response.

"Alek."

"Unless you're calling out my name in pleasure, be quiet." He spanks me again. The sensation hurts, but it's nowhere near as hard as when he spanked me the day before.

I gasp when his fingers slide between my legs.

“Still wet for me, I see,” he murmurs, touching my bundle of nerves. I can’t help it. I moan in pleasure as my hands grip the sheets. “You thought you could surprise me. That whole act of yours. I will say, it was a decent blow job. But now, I’m going to fuck you, Katia. And you better be screaming my name by the end of it.”

I hear him unzip his pants before his erection presses against my opening. I tense. Am I ready for this? Do I want this?

I could fight him. Scream. Bite. Kick. Claw.

But I don’t do any of these things because, deep down, a part of me wants to experience this. Despite how much I hate Alek, my body loves him.

Alek doesn’t even give me warning to make up my mind.

He thrusts his length right into me.

I cry out in pain, clutching the sheets harder. I try to move away, but Alek grips my hips, keeping me in place. He stops moving once he’s all the way inside me.

I always thought my first time would be romantic. Candlelight and flowers. But with Alek, it’s rough and raw. I shouldn’t have expected anything else.

“Fuck,” he murmurs before moving his hips, testing the waters. Now that my body has had a moment to adjust to him, it doesn’t hurt as much. In fact, I can feel a flicker of pleasure through the pain.

He lets out a deep growl as he picks up the pace, thrusting harder into me. Each thrust makes me gasp. Alek is making it clear—I belong to him. At this moment, it’s not about us as a couple. It’s about him claiming me like a fucking caveman.

Alek reaches beneath me and touches my clit. “Scream my name, Katia. I want to hear you scream my name in pleasure.” He presses down on my clit, sending a shockwave of pleasure over me. I moan, raising my hips. I hate that this feels good. I also love it.

I clench my lips shut as he rubs my clit harder, arousing me more. His other hand grips my hip so hard I can't move. His length continues to fill me. It's too much. I can barely breathe. My skin feels like it's going to combust into flames any second.

"I knew you'd feel so good around me," he says, thrusting harder into me. My lips part, and a moan comes out. "I'd knew you like this. Scream my name, Katia. I need to hear you *scream* it." He grinds his hips down. A grunt escapes me as I press my face into the mattress.

"Oh," I moan as more pleasure surrounds me. The mixture of pain and pleasure he's giving me is like nothing I've ever felt. It's intoxicating. "Oh!"

"Come." Thrust. "For." Thrust. "Me." Alek pinches my clit, and with the feeling of him inside me, it's enough to send me over the edge.

I cry out as I come.

"Say my name. Scream it." He grips my hips harder as he loses control and fucks me with wild abandon.

I finally say it. "Alek!" I scream like he wants me to, and for some reason, it doesn't feel shameful or humiliating. It feels like the right thing to do at the moment. Not to please Alek, but because *I* want to. I have no clue why, but it's how I feel. "Alek!"

He lets out a growl so deep it sends shudders over me. "That's my good girl. Fuck, baby." He thrusts into me once more as his release washes over him. I can feel his seed inside me, which makes me realize we didn't use protection. The thought sends a quick shot of panic into me.

Alek groans as he finishes. I slump to the mattress once my body stops shuddering. Alek pushes my hair off my neck and plants a kiss there. I shiver, then yelp when he spansks my ass. He chuckles. Bastard.

He pulls out of me, and the sudden feeling of emptiness is strange. I also feel distinctly sore. Alek used my body for his own pleasure, and it shows. He wasn't gentle at all.

I curl into a ball, suddenly ashamed. I can't believe that just happened. I'm no longer a virgin. My husband just fucked me like an animal. There was no love there.

Tears spring to my eyes. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"Your blood is on my cock," he says, startling me.

I glance over at him. He's smirking as he shows me his length. And there it is. Blood.

"I fucked you hard, didn't I," he says, putting his penis away and zipping up his pants.

My only response is to curl into a tighter ball.

"You were an ok fuck, for a virgin."

I clench my eyes shut, feeling the tears spill down my cheeks.

"Don't be sad. I'm sure you'll get better in time."

"Why are you being cruel?" I whisper.

He laughs. Fucking laughs. "Cruel is who I am. I thought you already knew that." He leans down and presses a rough kiss on my head. It's not comforting. It feels like another way for him to claim me. "Now, I'm going to take a shower. I'd suggest you do the same." He walks out of the room, locking the door behind him.

I sit up, wiping my tears away. A red spot on the sheets catches my attention. More of my blood. Alek really was rough with me.

That was a huge moment for me, and Alek just stomped all over it. Telling me I was an "ok fuck for a virgin." He is so insistent on being mean to me. There was no romance. He didn't even kiss me or take off my dress. Instead, he took me from behind like an animal, only bothering to push my dress up.

I feel cheap. Used. And now, in addition, sore. I can already feel how achy I am.

If sex is always like this, then I don't want it. Yes, he made me come again, but this deep feeling of loneliness and shame afterward is nothing I ever want to feel again. I'm tired of the pain he's put me through. By making me go against my ethics, by locking me up, by almost killing Stacey, my only friend, I'm fucking tired of it all.

Alek only had sex with me because he wanted to gain control. I was right. I managed to surprise him when I took him in my mouth. Which means I have the power to surprise him again.

I'll surprise him by escaping. This time, I'll succeed because I have someone on my side.

I reach under the mattress where I hid the card and pull it out.

Mikhail's number is right there. All I need to do is access a phone.

Once I do, I'm out of here.

CHAPTER 19

Alek

I storm down the stairs, passing Mila, who shrinks back. I just fucked Katia and lied to her. I told her she was “ok” for a virgin. The need to break her down is so strong that I didn’t even hesitate to say it. But it was all a lie.

Having sex with Katia was the best fucking thing I’ve ever experienced. Knowing *I* was the one staking claim to her made me feel fucking powerful. Instead of telling her this, I chose to hurt her. It’s no different from all the other times I’ve hurt her, but for some reason, I feel out of control. I lost myself when I fucked her, and I can’t let that happen again.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m looking forward to fucking Katia to the end of days. I just can’t be this unhinged. She makes me wild and impulsive. I’ve always been calculated, not crazy. And yet ... that’s exactly what Katia is turning me into.

A fucking unhinged, crazy man.

I need to get out of here and away from her. If I don’t, I’ll just go back in there and fuck her over and over again. I can’t let Katia think she has any power over me. If I give in to her, she might use that to her advantage. But she’s mine to play with, not the other way around.

“I’m leaving,” I mutter to Mila. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. Make sure Katia gets dinner.” Mila nods shakily as I brush past her.

I’m out the door and in my car in a matter of seconds. I need a distraction, and I know just where to go.

I arrive back at the club, which is now open for patrons. Deep heavy bass can be heard through the doors. People get out of my way as I approach the bouncer, a buff man named Mick. Some of them know who I am and put distance between themselves and me, knowing how powerful I am. Others don't recognize me, but they still give me a wide berth, probably from the scowl on my face and my pissed-off energy.

Mick lets me through, and I enter the club, taking a seat toward the back. There's no one here I need to sit center stage for. Katia is back home. No one else does anything for me.

Kitty rushes over to hand me my normal drink, and I give her a nod of thanks before she scurries off. I notice Alison and Lizzie exchanging glances as they look between themselves and back at me. All my girls are scared of me. After what I almost did to Stacey, I don't blame them. At least they're doing their jobs like the good girls they are. I can't ask for anything more.

A flash of red enters my vision. It's Anya.

She strolls right up to me and straddles my lap without permission.

"Anya, what are you doing?" I take a sip of my whiskey.

"Showing you what you missed when you didn't fuck me earlier." She grinds her hips down onto my lap. "Don't you miss this? Don't you want to fuck me again?" She leans close to my ear. "I've missed your big cock inside me."

I can't help it. My cock stirs. The image of fucking Anya with wild abandon is fun. But she's not the redhead I want anymore.

Katia is the one I want to fuck. I just can't trust myself around her right now.

Gazing at Anya. I guess I could fuck her from behind and pretend she's Katia. I get harder at the thought.

"Get up," I tell her.

She eagerly does.

"You want me to fuck you, is that it?"

“Yes, sir. So badly.”

I snort. “Fine.” I set my glass down on Alison’s tray as she passes by. “Let’s go.” I take her into one of the private rooms. “Get naked and then get on your hands and knees.”

Anya does exactly that. While she’s a beautiful woman, she’s not Katia. I can’t help but notice the differences between them. Katia’s breasts and hips are smaller than Anya’s, though Anya’s legs are longer. Anya’s hair is also a much darker red than Katia’s copper shade.

Once Anya is in position, she looks over her shoulder at me, shaking her ass. “Come on, sir. Fuck me.”

“Don’t look at me,” I snap. “Keep your face forward.” I don’t want to be reminded that Anya is not Katia.

Anya pouts but does as I say. I take a moment to stare at her body. At one point, I was in love with her body. I looked forward to fucking her every time I came to the club. But now ...

Now the desire to fuck her is just not there. I can try to pretend she’s Katia, but she just isn’t. Fuck. I don’t want to do this. What the fucking hell is wrong with me?

I slap Anya’s ass once. She moans loudly, but it sounds fake compared to Katia’s noises.

Then I turn away from her. “Get dressed, Anya. You’re embarrassing yourself.” Then I walk out the door.

“Wait,” I hear her call from behind me, but I keep walking.

The rest of the evening is uneventful, with the girls performing on stage and giving the men lap dances. Just a night like any other. I stay until all the customers and women leave. I’m left behind to sit at the bar and contemplate shit.

Breaking Katia down has been fun, but I still have a long way to go to break her fully. She’s a tough woman to crack. But if anyone can do it, it’s me.

The door opens and in walks Mikhail.

“I’m not in the mood to talk,” I grumble.

“Well, that’s good. Because neither am I.” He pulls the gun out of his pocket and points it at me.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Taking over.” Mikhail smirks as more men pile into the room. Some of them are my men, and some I don’t recognize. There is one other man I do know, though.

It’s Gabriel fucking Rossi. The Italian mob boss who wanted to do business with me and I’ve repeatedly sent Mikhail to turn down. The slick back black hair of his just makes him look like a fucking douchebag.

“Mikhail, what is this?” I ask, standing up slowly as the men point their guns at me.

“As I said,” Mikhail cocks his gun, “I’m taking over.”

CHAPTER 20

Katia

I pound on the door until Mila finally opens it. My hands are red from hitting it for so long.

“What?” she asks.

“I’m hungry. Can I have dinner?”

She nods sharply. “I’ll bring it up to you.”

“No, wait.” Mila looks at me warily as I speak. “I was wondering if I could eat downstairs.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Please, Mila. Alek has taken so much from me.” My vagina is insanely sore now that it’s been a couple of hours. Just another reminder of one more thing he’s ripped from me. “He’s made me feel like an animal locked in a cage. If you could just let me eat dinner downstairs, it would help me feel normal again.”

“How do I know you won’t run? You have a bad track record.”

“I won’t run. I promise. Alek would only find me. I’ve learned my lesson. Please, Mila.” I grab her hand. She tries to pull away, but I squeeze harder. “Please. Just give me this. Can you do that?”

She hesitates before sighing. “I don’t know ...” Her eyes sweep over me. I’m sure I look like a mess. My dress is wrinkled, and my hair is tangled. Alek doesn’t even have a comb in the bathroom. He probably figures I would use it as a

weapon. I look like a girl who's been fucked, literally. And I feel shame about it.

I could have fought Alek. I could have made it clear I didn't want him to have sex with me. But ...

A part of me wanted it. I wanted to feel him inside me. I wanted to know what sex would be like. It's so messed up, I know. But it's how I feel.

But now I regret it because Alek made me feel cheap afterward. Looking into Mila's eyes, I sense her judgment. Which pisses me off even as it fills me with embarrassment. I wish I didn't care what others thought about me.

"Please, Mila," I beg. "Please. Just let me eat downstairs. You can watch me the entire time. Keep a knife pointed at me, so I don't run. Just something. Anything. Just let me eat downstairs like a normal human being."

Mila rips her hand from mine. "Fine. But if you try to escape, I'm not taking the fall for you. I refuse to get into trouble with Mr. Antonov for anyone, especially a *girl* like you." She wrinkles her nose.

"And what kind of girl am I, Mila?"

"A pathetic one."

I flinch. I didn't know Mila was such a fucking bitch, but now I know. "Can I just have dinner now?" No use fighting with her. It's not going to help my case.

She huffs. "Fine. Come along."

Mila guides me downstairs and keeps her eyes on me until I sit at the kitchen table. I'm grateful I'm not eating in the dining room. I still have memories of when Alek went down on me in front of all of his men. I don't think I could ever eat on that table out of sheer humiliation.

Mila places a plate full of food in front of me—food I can actually eat. I dig in, not realizing I'm so hungry until I begin to eat. Mila keeps a knife pointed at me the entire time. I don't blame her. The last time we were alone, I managed to fight her and grab her key.

But it's not her key I want. It's the phone. I need to call Mikhail and see if he can't get me out of here tonight while Alek is gone. There's a landline near the refrigerator. It's almost taunting me for how close it is yet impossible to get to.

"Mila." I set my fork down. "Dinner was great."

She stands up straighter. "Thank you."

"I know you don't want to get into trouble with Alek, and you won't," I add quickly as she frowns. "It's just ... I haven't spoken to my dad in weeks. I miss him." A lie. He's the one who sold me to Alek in the first place. If it weren't for him, Alek never would have set his sights on me. "And I was wondering if you'd be ok if I called him."

"No."

I suck in a breath. "Mila, please. My dad was the one who gave me to Alek. He won't help me escape. I just want to call him and catch up. That's all. I'm so lonely all the time. I need this. *Please.*"

Mila glances at the phone and back to me. "Just your father?"

"Yes! Just him."

"And just to ... catch up?"

"Absolutely. I know Alek owns me. I have no plan to escape." Another lie. "I just miss his voice. That's all."

Mila stares at me hard before hanging her head. "What Mr. Antonov has done to you is ... terrible." She looks back at me. "Ok. You can call your father."

"Thank you so much." I could honestly cry.

I rush to the phone and dial the number Mikhail gave me. I made sure to memorize it. It helped keep me from going crazy, so that was something, at least. My heart is beating so hard it hurts as the phone rings and rings. What if Mikhail doesn't answer? This might be one of my only chances to do this. I don't know where Alek went, just that I heard him leave the house.

I breathe out when he answers.

“Mikhail, speaking.”

I glance at Mila. “Hi, Dad, it’s me. Katia.”

“Katia? You know this is not your father’s number, right?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Yes. I know. What you said you’d do for me ... it would mean a lot if you could do that.”

“Someone’s listening in, aren’t they?”

“Yes. You made a promise to me. I’d like you to keep it.”

He’s silent for a moment before he speaks. “Ok. I’m happy you called me, Katia. I hate how Alek treats you. I’ll get you out of there. I’ll send some men to pick you up and take you to me.”

Mila is washing the dishes. Fortunately, she’s giving me a little space.

“I’m in the kitchen right now,” I whisper. “But I might be locked back up in my room soon.”

“I’ll make sure to send someone over right away. They’ll get you out of there and bring you to me. You can trust me, Katia.”

I want to, so badly.

“Ok. Thank you.” Remembering I need to sell this as my father, I add, “I’ve missed your voice, Dad. Love you.”

Mikhail sounds amused when he says, “See you soon, Katia.”

I hang up, feeling jittery and more alive than I’ve felt since Alek married me. Careful not to arouse Mila’s suspicions, I sit back at the table. “Is it ok if I stay down here a little longer? You can keep an eye on me.”

Mila glances at me, her eyes soft. “Sure. Heaven knows you deserve it.” She goes back to washing the dishes.

I can’t just sit here in silence, waiting for Mikhail to save me, so I talk to Mila. “Where are you from?”

She smiles. "From Russia. I was born and raised there until my family moved here when I was only sixteen."

"What was growing up in Russia like?"

"Strict." She looks at me. "I know what it's like to have a man control your life."

"Alek is in control of yours now, isn't he?"

She nods. "I needed a job years ago and began working as a maid for his father. He was a cold man, always bossing me around. But I needed the money. Once he passed away, Alek kept me on. He's just as cold as his father, but ... at least he doesn't boss me around so much."

"The devil you know," I murmur.

"You could say that. All I've ever known is strict men. I don't know anything different."

"Well, I do. My dad could be strict at times, but he could also be very loving. I also got to talk to boys at school who could be nice. Not all men are like Alek."

"He's your husband either way."

My heart deflates. "Yeah, he is, isn't he?"

Mila wipes her hands with a towel after putting the dishes in the dishwasher. "I haven't said anything because I need this job. You have to understand that. I don't agree with how he's treated you, but I don't have any other options." She sounds a lot like Stacey when I first went to her for help. Alek has a tight hold on the people in his life, whether his employees or his wife.

"I do," I finally say. "It's all Alek's fault. He makes it so that everyone in his life must fend for themselves."

She smiles. I return it. Maybe Mila isn't as mean as I thought.

A knock at the door makes me jump.

Mila frowns as she starts walking out of the kitchen. "Wonder who that could be?"

I wait until she's gone to stand up and follow her. She opens the door, and I see a man with a distinctive scar on his face on the other side. It's Yuri.

Why the hell would Mikhail send Yuri? Unless Yuri isn't ok with how Alek treats me either, but I seriously doubt it. I saw Yuri kill Jeremy with no remorse. I doubt a man like him could help me. The urge to run back upstairs is strong, but I stay rooted to my spot. If Mikhail did send Yuri, then this is my only chance to escape.

"Mr. Antonov isn't here," Mila tells him.

Yuri looks behind her and right at me. "Let's go, princess. Your chariot is waiting."

Mila looks back at me. "Did you know about this?"

I shake my head.

Yuri sighs. "Come on. I don't have all night." He snaps his fingers at me like I'm a dog. Talk about humiliating me.

I finally force myself to move and approach him. "Are you taking me to Alek?"

Yuri shoots his eyes at Mila before turning back to me. "Yeah," he says dryly. "Sure." That's not reassuring at all, but I can't ask him if he's really here to take me to Mikhail. Mila could stop me though I have no clue how she could stop Yuri.

I give Mila a quick hug. "Thanks for dinner."

She looks stunned but not unhappy. "You're welcome."

I turn to Yuri. "Ok. Let's go." I step foot outside. It's the first time I've done it without Alek by my side.

Yuri motions for me to get into his car. I take the backseat, not wanting to sit next to Yuri if I don't have to.

Yuri whistles as he drives me away from Alek's house. I watch it disappear in the back window. This will be the last time I have to look at the house of horrors again.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To Mikhail."

“I know, but *where* exactly?”

He looks at me in the rearview mirror. “You’ll see, princess.”

My nerves are skyrocketing. Something doesn’t feel right. “I’m surprised Mikhail would send you. You don’t seem the type to want to save women in distress.”

He chuckles—it’s low and gravely. “I’m not. But Mikhail paid me a lot of money to pick you up, and I’ll do anything for money.”

“So, you don’t have any allegiance to Alek or Mikhail. You’re just a hired hand?”

He winks at me. It makes me shudder. “You got it, princess.”

As long as Mikhail paid Yuri enough money to deliver me to him, everything will be fine. I don’t need to be afraid. Yes, Yuri murdered Jeremy right in front of me, and the image still haunts me. But I don’t need to be afraid. I don’t need to be afraid. I don’t. I don’t. But each time I try reassuring myself, I become more and more nervous.

Looking out the window, I realize I recognize many of the places we’re passing. New York is a huge place. I’m surprised I recognize where we’re going. It’s the same route Alek takes whenever he brings me to the strip club.

Maybe Mikhail lives nearby there. But something tells me that isn’t right.

My concerns are confirmed when Yuri pulls into the parking lot for the strip club.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“Mikhail is here.”

“But ...”

“But what?”

“I just assumed you were taking me to his house or something.”

Yuri just laughs and gets out of the car before opening my door. “Come on, princess. Your white knight is waiting to rescue you.”

He tries to take my arm, but I jerk away and hurry toward the doors. This is the last place I want to be, but I also don’t want to be alone with Yuri any longer than I have to.

I open the door and hurry inside before stopping short. I expected the club to empty, seeing as it’s late, but no, the room is packed.

Alek stands near the bar, his hands raised while all the other men in the room have their guns pointed at him. Mikhail is one of them.

Alek’s eyes land on me as he furrows his brow. “Katia?”

Mikhail turns to me. “Ah! You made it.” He grabs my arm and tugs me in close to him. “Thanks, Yuri.” Yuri comes in after me, nodding at Mikhail. He saunters to one of the chairs and settles in to watch whatever is happening here.

“What’s going on?” I ask Mikhail. “You were supposed to get me somewhere safe.”

“No. I said I was going to send someone to bring you to me. I never said anything about your safety.”

I blink as all the air leaves my body. “What? You lied to me?”

Mikhail’s laugh is ugly. “Of course, I did. I’m a mafia man, after all. I just wanted to convince you to leave Alek.” He turns to Alek. “See? Even you can’t keep a hold of your wife long enough. She practically ran to me, begging me for help.”

Alek stares at me with so much betrayal and anger. I haven’t done anything wrong. I was only running from the man who kidnapped and tortured me. And yet, I feel guilty.

“You set me up,” I whisper to Mikhail.

“Mmm? What was that?” he asks.

“You set me up,” I say louder.

“I did.” He has no remorse on his face. “And now, I’m here to take over, and you can be my bride once I’m done killing Alek. How does that sound?”

Fuck no. I naively thought Mikhail would help me escape. He was supposed to release me and let me run away from the mafia.

Instead, it was a ploy for him to get his hands on me. Mikhail never wanted to help me. He just wanted to hurt Alek. It’s clear by how he’s looking at Alek so smugly. I fell right into his trap.

I look between Alek and Mikhail. All the guns pointed at Alek. The tension in the room.

I’m stuck between two powerful mafia men, and there’s no one to save me. I just betrayed my husband and fell into the hands of Mikhail, who betrayed me.

I’m completely on my own.

The End

**Alek and Katia’s story will continue in *Bound by Brutality*,
coming out on April 25!**

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His duty was to choose me but his desire claimed me...

I am married off to the head of the Bratva, Maxim Petrov.

Taken from my safe home,

I'm thrust into an entirely new world:

One filled without mercy.

My new husband is a cold, ruthless man.

My body is consumed by him,

While my heart knows he could break it.

I want to love him,

But he's made it difficult.

I try to break through the ice surrounding his heart.

Can I do it in time to save our marriage?

If I can't,

Both me and my husband will be bound together forever...

Stuck in a marriage without love.

[Start reading Merciless Union NOW!](#)

SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One:

Maxim

I watch as my father's body is lowered into the ground, listening to the cries around me. My hands clench at my sides. Most of those cries are fake. My father wasn't the most loved man—in fact, more people hated than loved him. But it's a mafia funeral.

Everything is for show.

I glance around at the guests attending my father's funeral. Over a hundred people showed, probably to get in my good graces. With my father gone, I'm head of the Bratva now.

The men who used to work for my father now work for me. I see some of them nod at me, offering pitying looks. Others exchange secretive glances as if I can't see. We all know what's about to happen.

A bloodbath.

Even though I'm the rightful heir to the Bratva in New York, many of my father's men will want to contest it. The majority of them will fall in line the minute I'm officially made the boss, but I know—and they know—some of them will try to take over.

A few might even try to kill me.

I have to be on my guard and take ownership of the Bratva as soon as this funeral is over, claiming my rightful place.

I won't get killed because my father unexpectedly died at fifty-eight. He should have had many more years left. But drinking and sleeping around will take a toll on the body. He died in the arms of one of his many mistresses, much to my mother's shame, Vasilisa.

She's standing beside me, her head held high, no tears in her eyes. With her cool blonde hair and startling blue eyes, my mother is a fierce-looking woman. She won't cry for anyone, which I learned growing up. She especially won't cry for the

man who left her with unsteady leadership and fucked another woman in her bedroom.

I'm proud of her, but I know my mother—she's never needed anyone's approval. She'll make it clear how she feels about you, whether you like it or not.

A smaller hand grips my own. I glance down at my baby sister, Kira. She has our mother's looks while I take after my father with his dark hair and deep blue eyes.

At only fifteen, Kira will feel the death of our father the hardest. She looks up at me, tears leaking from her eyes, and I offer her a small smile. I can't show any affection to my siblings in public, not in front of the men who expect me to be a ruthless leader. But Kira needs my support as best as I can offer it.

I squeeze her hand, hoping she finds some comfort in it.

Elena, my other sister, sighs as she watches the casket disappear. She's the spitting image of our mother and a lot like her, too—cold and reserved. The Ice Princess of the Bratva, as she's nicknamed.

At her side is our brother, Alexei. He wipes at his eyes, trying to look tough. Good. He needs to learn that Bratva men don't show their emotion in public. If something were to ever happen to me, Alexei would be next in line to take over. I can't have him breaking down, even though it's our father's funeral. There's no mercy within the mafia.

It's something I had to learn the hard way growing up.

Quick, hard fists from my father. I had bruises throughout most of my childhood. Eventually, I got used to them, though my father stopped trying to hurt me after I got bigger and stronger. I was no longer weak. Now, at thirty, I haven't let anyone hit me in over ten years. It's a good feeling. A strong feeling.

Once the casket is fully lowered into the ground and everyone is dispersing to head to the reception, I take one last look around at everyone who showed up. I recognize many of the men since they've attended meetings with my father for

years. Though, I don't recognize their families. Now that I'll be the leader of the Bratva, I need to start memorizing faces and names. I need to know who's on my side and who'll cause trouble.

A flash of red catches my eye.

A younger woman is standing next to an older man, her eyes downcast. Her features are stunning, elegant, and refined. There's a poise to her I find intriguing. Red hair frames her face so perfectly, and I feel the urge to wrap my hands in it.

The older man, George Smirnoff, one of my father's most trusted employees, nudges her. She opens her eyes and nods, following George as he walks away.

Still gripping Kira's hand, I turn away to lead my family to our car. Once inside, Elena says, "I'm glad that's over with."

Alexei shoots her a glare. "He was our father. Show some respect."

Elena doesn't dignify Alexei's comment. Instead, she looks out the window, silent and icy as always.

"Don't snap at your sister," our mother scolds as the driver starts the car and takes off. We're all in the backseat, Kira, our mother, and me on one seat, with Elena and Alexei across from us. "You're a Petrov. We don't show our emotions, and we certainly don't show it in front of others."

Alexei scowls, crossing his arms. "So sue me for crying at our dad's funeral."

"You'll learn in time," I say. Kira rests her head on my shoulder, sniffing. I can feel my jacket shoulder grow wet.

Alexei nods at Kira. "She gets to cry."

"She's fifteen," I remind him. "You're twenty-three. And you might have to rule someday. You can't ever show weakness."

"It's not fucking fair," he mutters,

Our mother snaps, "Language." Alexei fixes his jacket, not responding to her.

I look down at Kira. “How are you doing?”

She wipes her eyes, not meeting my gaze. “I’ll be fine.”

I put a finger under her chin, lifting her face. My thumb wipes one of her tears away, and she makes a face. “It’s all right to be sad.”

“Is it?” she asks.

I smile softly at her. “For you, it is.”

Alexei mutters under his breath, rolling his eyes. “You baby her.”

I ignore him, focusing on Kira. “Everything will be all right. I’ll take care of you.”

“You’ve already been taking care of me,” she says, lowering her voice so Mother can’t hear. “More than father ever did.”

Our father hit Alexei and me but never laid a hand on Elena or Kira. He had other ways to control them growing up, like never letting them leave the house unsupervised. They’ve been kept on tight leashes their entire lives. I know that’s why Elena isn’t upset about our father’s death. At twenty-five, she’s never been allowed to get married, while most girls in the Bratva are married off by the time they’re twenty. She’s never seen freedom. I was too young to protect her growing up.

But for Kira, I made sure to take the brunt of our father’s attention, so he couldn’t hurt her in the same way. It also helped that Kira was my parents’ miracle baby, which explains why she’s so much younger than the rest of us.

I had the strength to take care of her, and I’ve made sure to do so ever since she was born.

Alexei thinks I spoil her, but she’s my baby sister. I can’t help it.

The rest of the car ride is filled with strained tension. It’s like a bubble popping when we reach the reception hall. Alexei scrambles out of the car while I help my mother and

sisters out. A Bratva man is ruthless and cold but also respectful when it comes to the women in his life.

Alexei doesn't head inside. Instead, he walks away from the reception hall, going down the street.

"I'll meet you inside," I murmur to my mother. She glances at Alexei, pursing her lips before nodding, then ushers Elena and Kira to follow her inside.

I walk fast to catch up to Alexei and grab his arm to stop him. "Where do you think you're going?"

He rips his arm out of my hold. "Does it matter?" His blue eyes flash in anger. He also got out father's looks—dark and menacing. Everyone commented on the Petrov children growing up. Half of them are dark, the other half are light. It got old, real fast whenever someone said so at a party or function.

"Yes, it matters," I growl, grabbing his arm again. "I know what you're doing."

Alexei smirks. "Yeah? And what am I doing, Maxim? Hmm?"

"You're going to get into trouble. This isn't the first time you've pulled a stunt when you're upset. Don't be stupid."

He jerks his arm away again. I don't try to grab him this time. "I'm not stupid," he seethes. "And I can do whatever the hell I want."

I glance around, noticing that as the guests arrive, they're glancing at the scene Alexei and I are making. "Keep your fucking voice down. I want you to go in there and be on your best behavior. No chaos."

He shakes his head, chuckling darkly. "Are you commanding this as my brother or my leader?"

"As your brother. But that can quickly change if you want to play it that way."

Alexei looks at me as if I'm the enemy. "Then, as my brother, you don't get to boss me around." He looks toward the reception hall. "I'm going to grieve Dad in my own way."

“If you do this,” I say, stepping in front of him, “it won’t look good for the family. It won’t look good for me that I can’t even get my brother to attend our father’s funeral. You’re going to make it harder for me to gain the trust of our father’s men. Think about your actions, Alexei.”

He scoffs. “You don’t think I do? You guys don’t need me in there. I’ll just fucking mess it up like I do everything else.” He gives me another disappointed look, then walks away.

I could try dragging him into the reception, but that wouldn’t be a good look either.

So, instead, I straighten my shoulders, fix my tie, and head off into the reception. I need to be present. Alexei can be the fuckup all he wants, but I need to do my duty for my family.

I rejoin my family as our guests offer condolences. The reception hall is decked out in the finest furnishings, fanciest foods, and most elegant décor imaginable. My mother went all out planning everything. Nothing but the best for my father, even in death.

Kira takes my hand again, and I give it another squeeze.

“So sorry for your loss,” one of my father’s men says as he approaches—I guess I’ll have to start thinking of them as my men. It’ll be an adjustment. This one is named Stepan Pasternack. He laundered money for the bratva, using his bar, casino, and strip club as lucrative businesses to hide the income from our drug shipments.

A small, hairy little man, Stepan has a glint in his eye I dislike as I shake his hand.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

Stepan’s eyes glide over to Kira. “I’ve never seen you out of your castle before.”

Kira doesn’t reply, ducking her head instead. While Elena chooses to be reserved to retain her ice princess status, Kira is genuinely shy. It’s another reason why I feel the need to protect her.

“Our father preferred her safe,” I cut in. “Nowhere safer than at home. I’m sure you can understand that, having daughters of your own.”

Stepan chuckles, making the skin crawl on the back of my neck. “Oh, I do. I hope you enjoy your time out of your castle, Princess.” His eyes slide over to Elena, who’s giving him a look of disgust. “Ah, the Ice Princess herself.” He extends his hand to her. Elena looks down at it as if his hand is covered in poison.

“No,” she says simply, turning her nose up to him.

Stepan’s face falls before he turns his smile on my mother. “Vasilisa, my condolences.”

She smiles tightly. “Thank you.”

“And Maxim,” he says, turning back to me. “I hope you have a long and eventful reign.”

I nod, then watch as he walks away. This job is going to be tougher than I thought.

The next guest to approach is George Smirnoff. Following him is the beautiful woman from earlier—the one with the red hair.

“Maxim, you know I’m here for you if you need anything,” George says, shaking my hand. Even at my father’s funeral, he’s already trying to get in good with me. I don’t mind. At least I know I can trust George. I can’t speak the same for a lot of the men here.

“Of course.” I pat his shoulder. “I appreciate that.”

George gestures for the woman to step forward. “This is my daughter, Arina.”

I offer her my hand, and she gently takes it. The handshake only lasts a second, but I can still feel her hand in mine long after it’s gone.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Petrov,” she says in a sweet, twinkling voice.

I nod, keeping my face composed in a cool manner.

“Keep in mind what I said,” George comments before he guides his daughter away.

Kira squeezes my hand. “She was pretty,” she whispers.

“Where are you going with that comment?” I murmur out of the corner of my mouth.

She shrugs. “Just commentating.”

“Maxim,” a deep voice says as Nikolay Volkov approaches and shakes my hand. “Terrible loss. Your father will be missed.”

“Thanks, Nik,” I say dryly. Nikolay, or as I call him, Nik, has been my best friend ever since we were children. He’s the only one here I can completely trust. I also know he hated my father just as much as I did.

Nik glances over at Elena, but she turns her head away, sniffing as if he were a dog. With dark hair and a scruffy demeanor, I’ve seen women fall at Nik’s feet over the years. He always told me that women couldn’t resist his tattoos. I’m sure it’s a surprise to him that my sister has never swooned over him. I’m proud of her for that.

Nik smirks and looks back at me. I raise an eyebrow, but his smile just grows wider.

Glancing around, I lean in closer to him. “Listen, Nik. I’d like to talk to you about something. Come with me.” I start to walk away when Kira grips my hand tighter. I give her a small smile. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. I promise.”

She nods, letting my hand go.

I gesture for Nik to follow me, and we find a more secluded, quiet room away from the main reception hall. It’s a small library, with thick leather chairs all over the room for reading.

“What did you want to talk about?” Nik asks, entering the room.

I shut the door firmly behind me. “I want you to be my second in command.”

Nik's eyes widen before a smile breaks out on his face. "I would be honored."

"Good. That's settled."

Nik chuckles. "Just like that?"

I shrug. "Just like that. When I'm sworn in as leader tomorrow, I want you by my side. Everyone will know to follow you after me."

"Thank you so much for this opportunity. I won't let you down." He rubs his hands together, a glint in his eye. "So, what's first on the agenda for us?"

An idea pops into my mind. "Marriage."

Nik frowns, dropping his hands. "Not what I was expecting."

"I need to get married. I can already sense the rumblings of shifting power. I know a lot of those men out there would love the chance to be in charge of the Bratva and get me out of the way for good. They would also come after my family, and I can't have that."

"Of course not."

I sigh. "So, I think marriage is my best bet to keep some of these men in line."

Nik leans against a chair. "True. A strong marriage alliance could help enact goodwill. Did you have anyone in mind?"

"I do. George Smirnoff."

Nik smirks. "You're going to marry George Smirnoff?"

I give him a look. "No. His daughter. George has a lot of sway over the others. He's been with my father for years, one of his most trusted employees. If people see that George likes me, more will give me their vote of confidence."

"And," he says slowly, "the best way to get George completely on your side is to marry his daughter."

"Exactly."

"What's her name?"

“Her name?”

Nik sighs, shaking his head. “You don’t even know her name.”

“I know her name. Arina.” Her billowy red hair and elegant features come to mind. “Her name’s Arina.”

“Well, does *Arina* know what she’s getting herself into?”

“No. But she’ll soon learn. Then she’ll be mine.”

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